WHAT BECAME OF MR. DESMOND

by

C. NINA BOYLE

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WHAT BECAME OF MR. DESMOND

CHAPTER I

A PICTURE FALLS

TRUTH is stranger than fiction—a platitudinous remark frequently resorted to by platitudinarians. Its triteness, and a certain smack of profundity that clings to it, endears it to such persons; just as its truthfulness—its very undeniability—prevents them from getting so much as a glimpse of its reality. The ordinary, the platitudinous mind, lacks imagination, and it may even be courage enough, to grapple with reality. Had the majority of us a sufficient supply of imagination, indeed, to grasp the true meaning of the battered and hackneyed saying so universally quoted, it is probable that the ordinary supply of courage might give out in contemplating the possibilities of Life under such a search-light.

For, what is Fiction? Is it not simply a weaving and shifting and re-arranging of the strands that go to make up ordinary life—haunting tragedy side by side with petty incident, bitter sorrow and grim comedy mixed with the deadly dulness, the heavy burden, the

frivolous chatter, of the daily round, the common task? When we find in it wild adventure, terrible disaster, difficult problems, insoluble mysteries—the lighter, happier, more genial side of life in juxtaposition with crime, vice, danger and despair—do we realise that these improbable things *happen?* And when we read, in the stilted and seldom correct journalese which fills the columns of the penny press, of some unimaginable family tangle, some scandal whose dimensions make the Divorce Court stagger, some disaster that seems incredible, some mystery more dreadful than death; do we grasp that it is from these sordid and sensational chronicles the skilful authors on whose portrayal of romance we hang with thrills of joy, pity, or horror, derive inspiration? Situations as romantic, possibilities as unplumbed, dangers and mysteries as profound as any devised by the most subtle brain, surround our daily life and accompany us every step of the way through it.

The bank manager on whose wife we call with a bored courtesy, and whose housekeeping we admire, may be the one brought before the Criminal Courts to divulge a tale of fraud stupendous. The man who blew his brains out at Monte Carlo played dumb crambo with our first cousin's children last Christmas. The girl whose maltreated body was found below the cliff, tossed by the tide, murdered in God knows what frenzy of passion and rage, sat next our daughter in the Censors' office, and was an authority on knitted jumpers. The distraught mother who cut her own and her three children's throats, and left a blind and

helpless husband to mourn them, was our neighbour's charwoman. The youngster who "held up" a bank and inadvertently committed murder on the old clerk, was at evening classes with Bert and Bill. The officer murdered before his wife's eyes in Dublin is unexpectedly the son of a woman we have seen for years at our Club, and to whom we sometimes speak. The little girl burnt to death while her mother was shopping was the one to whom you gave a penny because she danced so daintily to the street-organ.

What happens to these people can happen to us; and that is the strangest and truest of all the things wrapped up in the phrase "Truth is stranger than fiction."

So, there was nothing at all surprising, looked at from the point of view of the philosopher, in what happened at Fairlands in the case of Mr. David Desmond. It happens very often, to a number of people we do not know, and of whom we read with a casual and short-lived interest, in little paragraphs in the papers; and it is safe to presume, might at any given moment happen to you and me, or to our next-door neighbour. It may be very disconcerting, and it may be very surprising to us, or to them; but it is not in itself surprising.

When Mr. Desmond disappeared, people found it so surprising they talked about it for quite a considerable length of time. In those days, the Press was not so alert as now, and people were not so anxious to have their names mentioned in its columns. Mr. Desmond, in particular, had inherited from his old-fash-

ioned father a horror of Press publicity. For your name to "get into the papers" was to him the acme of vulgarity; and he used the suggestion as a threat to quell the exuberant modernity of his sister. Mr. Desmond was old-fashioned in more ways than this. His father had burned wax candles on the dining-table longer than any other of his acquaintances, and used moderator lamps that were fed with colza oil, as long as such lamps were manufactured. He cherished a contempt and dislike for gas and paraffin; and his one incursion into modernity was when he adopted electric lighting in advance of anyone else in the neighbourhood to emphasise his detestation of the "new-fangled" notions that succeeded colza oil and moderator lamps. Mr. David Desmond remembered, and approved, and sympathised in this habit of mind.

Mr. Desmond was a highly domesticated man. He took the greatest interest in the home and all pertaining to it. He knew the damask patterns of all the table-cloths, and often asked where the new kitchen-cloths he had seen drying, were bought. He was the first to see that there was a faded spot in the dining-room carpet, and had an unerring eye for dust and unswept corners. He loved hanging pictures, putting up shelves, tinkering at taps, winding the kitchen eight-day clock, mowing the lawn, and oiling locks and hinges. He knew the price of eggs, liked to be asked his opinion of the fowl Cook was trussing, and flattered himself that the most becoming, as well as the most lasting dresses his wife wore, were those of his choosing. A busy, bustling, contented creature, with a sub-

stantial income, a pleasant house, and a good-looking, good-tempered and promising family, he was an object of mild envy to less fortunate men.

Mrs. Desmond was an excessively handsome woman, as phlegmatic and indolent as her husband was the reverse. She immersed herself in the reading of light literature, devouring the romances of Thackeray, Scott, Dickens, Reade and Wilkie Collins, Mrs. Gaskell, Jane Austen, and the Brontës; with unambitious incursions into Macaulay's Essays, Pepy's Diary, and Plutarch's Lives. Her housekeeping was a thing to which she roused herself, from these pleasing realms of imagination, with difficulty and reluctance, seeming to come back to it from distant spaces, a little dreamy-eyed and absent. Her husband used to say that the Master of Ravenswood, or Col. Newcombe, was a far more real personage to her than he, her husband; and she would smile her charming, absent smile, and not deny it. She liked to know he was about the place, and it gave her a subconscious satisfaction to hear him mowing, or hammering, or investigating the kitchen flue—the noise of his operations reaching her and soothing, rather than disturbing her. He also liked to know she was about the place, and could settle to nothing, and do little else than fidget, on the rare occasions that he came in and found her away from the house. What of companionship they gave each other, that was missed when not forthcoming, was a mystery to the outside world that laughed and did not understand.

So when Mr. Desmond disappeared, there were not wanting those who said they did not wonder at it.

When a man had a wife who took no interest in his pursuits and tastes, and who was so cold and detached and so wrapped up in her own fancies, one must not be surprised at what happened. These persons saw, in their mind's eye, a philandering Mr. Desmond secretly meeting and finally eloping with some gayer, warmer, more expansive lady; and discounted all the circumstances which made this theory seem fantastic to his family.

Mr. Desmond had been married twelve years, and was in the habit of saying, in that way of his that sounded so bad when repeated, and so delightful when uttered, that it seemed like twenty-four rather than twelve. He could not, he declared, remember anything about the time before he was married. It was not. It had not been life, or anything worth recording; memory began, for him, from the date of his marriage. And Mrs. Desmond, listening, would smile her long-distance smile, and ask whether there was not someone still moving in the kitchen, and had they remembered to feed Polly. It was her nearest approach to housewifely concern; but as her servants were of the old and faithful kind, who had been in Mr. Desmond's family from generation to generation, and who worshipped the Master and the Mistress, it did not much matter.

In consequence of discretion, consideration, or—it might be—merely happy good fortune, Mrs. Desmond's family had not been poured upon her year after year in overwhelming succession, as was so frequently the case, especially in those days. The eldest

child was eleven, a son, busy and restless like his father, but with rather a superior attitude towards that parent's activities as those of an amateur. Brookes got the lawn mowed more quickly and smoothly; Tenterley never hit his nails with the hammer, nor notched jags with the plane. There was a critical attitude that Mr. Desmond sometimes found a little hard, and Mrs. Desmond disliked as disrespectful. It did not extend to her; in the child's eye she was perfect, but that did not lessen her disapproval.

After Lennox came May, aged eight—a sweet, sunny creature, fair and fluffy and affectionate; followed by Luttrell, aged six, who was her devoted slave. The twins, Hubert and Hero, were between two and three; their advent had been a world-shaking event, from which the family had hardly yet recovered. Mrs. Desmond had almost roused herself to concern about the resources available in baby-clothes, and could not get over having taken everyone by surprise in such a fashion; while Mr. Desmond never really rid himself of the impression that his wife had indulged in a wild and reckless enterprise which showed her to be a very adventurous person, in spite of all appearances to the contrary.

"I wonder what we may expect you to do next?" he would ask; or, "What place are you going to break out in now?" as if he suspected her of deep and humorous plottings to take the family by surprise.

Miss Hermione Desmond, Mr. Desmond's sister, a vivacious young woman of four-and-twenty, lavished much affection on her brother and his wife, and

thought them two delightfully absurd and darling people whom Providence had appointed her to watch over and protect. She was passionately attached to the children, and gave up much of her time to them; nevertheless, the objectless, untrained life of those days, in which a young woman's occupations were limited to visiting, croquet, embroidery and waiting for a husband, goaded her into incautious and mutinous expressions which caused Mr. Desmond much uneasiness.

"You shouldn't," he used to say. "You don't want to be taken for one of these New Women, do you?"

The New Woman was the last word in reproach.

The catastrophe that overtook the house of Desmond, was, as will be seen, as unexpected, as bewildering, as it was possible to envisage. In such a family, and in such a neighbourhood, where peace and the proprieties reigned unquestioned, it naturally made a greater sensation than if it had occurred in one of those unfortunate places where the smooth surface of Society is constantly disturbed by the ripples of scandal and the splashes of tragedy.

The way of it was almost the worst part of it. There was all the horror of mystery closing in on the absolutely matter-of-fact. Nothing could have been more homely, less allied to the dramatic, than the actions of Mr. Desmond that day. In point of fact, it was one of those days when he was thoroughly enjoying himself. A picture had fallen.

In some households, the falling of a picture spreads dismay. Like the breaking of a looking-glass, it is

held to be a portent of disaster. Not so in the Desmond family. The smiling servants whispered gleefully, "Here is a job for the Master," and Miss Desmond wanted to know what her brother could have been thinking of, to leave the picture-cords so long uninspected.

"When one comes down, others are sure to do it too. It will be a nice piece of work for you, David, to see to them all and test the cords. Did the cord break?"

"No," said Mr. Desmond. "The nail came out. I do not think it was long enough. The walls always were rather soft."

After breakfast there was a great turning-out of the cupboard in which he kept his collection of tools; and a great comparing and selecting of nails. Not only did the fallen picture rise again to its place on the wall, but many other pictures came down and went up again, with their nails changed and their cords renewed. Mr. Desmond worked hard, whistling and humming, in cheerful preoccupation; and sometimes one, sometimes another of his household watched him and made useful—or otherwise—comments and suggestions.

Lennox was more than critical. On one occasion he was pert; and his aunt sent him away "until he learned how to behave himself."

At lunch-time the Rector called, and was pressed to stay for the meal. Lingering over the port with his old College friend, it was three o'clock before Mr. Desmond got back to the picture-hanging.

It was his custom to array himself for these enterprises in a green baize apron, with a workmanlike

pocket divided into compartments reaching all along his front. In these compartments he kept nails, and stuck his hammer or pincers when not wanted. He removed his coat, because that was the thing to do; and worked in his shirt-sleeves. Sometimes he made a feint of spitting on his hands, to make Miss Desmond, or old Brookes, laugh.

"I'm one nail short," he complained, searching in the baize pocket. There was one more picture; and in removing the old nail it had got twisted, and by no process of hammering could be straightened for use again.

A prolonged hunt in the cupboard produced no nail suitable.

"I *must* finish this," said Mr. Desmond, as anxiously as if England's fate depended upon it. "I can't be prevented for want of one nail. Where is Brookes?"

Brookes had gone to load manure. Mary was "busy" with Mrs. Desmond, and Miss Desmond, during that period, was in charge of Hubert and Hero, who watched their father with admiring eyes. Lennox had trotted home with the Rector to see the Rectory pups; Luttrell was too young to be sent errands alone.

"I'll step round to Tenterley's," said Mr. Desmond. "It does not do to be without nails like that in the house."

He went, just as he was—with an unsophisticated pleasure in looking workmanlike—in green baize apron, shirt-sleeves, bare head; with a hammer sticking out of one pocket compartment, and the twisted nail in his hand to measure with to get a larger size.

He went out of the children's playroom, on the ground floor, along the short, tiled passage to the side-door that opened into the grassy walk down the garden. Half-way down, a little path at right angles, to the right, led to a door in the garden wall, which he opened. Passing out into the lane, he closed it behind him, to "step round to Tenterley's."

CHAPTER II

STEPPING ROUND TO TENTERLEY'S

TENTERLEY'S was the last shop in the straggling village street, which made a great dip and widened out considerably at the place where the shops came to an end. Alongside Tenterley's little low-browed, wide-windowed house, with the one tiny dormer window in a roof not intended for such adornments, was a lane, running back slant-wise from the street; and on the other side of this lane rose the high brick wall, uncompromising and blank, of The Domain, topped by the grey brow of the Old Tower. Across the street, ending the shops on that side, was a high, masoned path with a hand-rail skirting a deep bit of water that had a shallower shore at the further side. Round this pond the village children played; and a trickling streamlet ran out from the shore furthest from the street, which was a goose-green that in winter became a nasty, marshy, messy, impassable slough. Access to it was obtained by the high masoned path with the hand-rail.

Facing the water and the Green, The Domain stood, four-square solid, ruddy, ancient, squat. The old family still lived there, proud and exclusive, untouched

by the vulgarities of the new generation. Once they had lived at Fairlands Park, and owned the countryside. Now, Lord Gotto of Gozo had the Park and building companies most of the land; and the old family had nothing left of their wide possessions but the Manor Farm and the Homestead, and The Domain in its high walls. The three properties, lying together in and beyond the village, were the oldest part of the Gervase estates, Fairlands being, comparatively, a mushroom.

The frowning brick walls, dating from Tudor times, still enclosed the Old Tower, a powerful Norman structure that rose above the wall and showed a blank, stony cheek to the pretty lane. Its square, uncompromising strength looked to even greater advantage on the inside, where, close to a door in the wall, it jutted out and made a deep angle. Its own door, arched, deep-set, and of still solid wood, was polished and tempered and kept in beautiful repair, as were the stout metal fastenings and adornments with which it was reinforced. It was reputed to be haunted, but none alive could claim to have seen "anything uglier than themselves," as Adams, the groom, was in the habit of saying. Little use was made of it, except to store wood and coal; although Miss Desmond used to say, with envy, that it could be made into such a lovely playhouse for the children. The Domain children, however, had never used it for any special purpose until Hugh Gervase developed a taste for carpentry, when one of the rooms was converted into a workshop.

The village was called Lower Domain; the station three miles away, was Fairlands. The railway served the new and well-to-do suburb that had sprung up on the Fairlands Manor property—laid out in highly desirable building plots by an enterprising creditor of the old Squire's—rather than the village. Fanciful houses, in imitation of all styles old and new, with spacious gardens, had sprung up in all directions on the Manor property. Tennis courts and sports grounds, and a library, were laid out and founded; no shops were allowed. The community got its goods from London, and was correspondingly unpopular with Lower Domain.

Lord Gotto of Gozo was a red-faced, bawling man whose title commemorated something in connection with some long-forgotten battle at which he was said to have led a forlorn hope and broken through triumphantly. Ill-natured people said that he had scattered a convoy of cargo-boats. He had shouted until he got the title, and gone on shouting ever after. His wife was enormously rich, only liked rich people, and was rude to others. She did vulgar things because she chose, not because she did not know better; and she invariably said the most disconcerting things she could think of. The couple enjoyed that peculiar popularity which is compounded of envy, fear, and the desire to participate in the good things with which they surrounded themselves.

There was no actual rivalry between the new community and the old. Rivalry was out of the question. The old community disliked and despised the new.

The new was hardly aware of the existence of the old, and never cast them a thought. Those who, like the Desmonds, planted their banners nearer to the village and further from the suburb, threw in their lot with the county and The Domain, and thought evil of bawling Lord Gotto and his *nouveaux-riches* friends.

Mr. Desmond summed it up acutely.

"Send to Fortnum and Mason's for a quarter-of-a-pound of oatmeal, or to the landlord for a man to mend the tap! They would never think of giving a little custom to old Ned Tipper, or a day's work to Tenterley."

Tenterley was a carpenter and cabinet-maker. He kept all the beautiful old furniture in the quaint houses in repair, dealt with dry-rot or other disorders in the panelling, and could make you anything from a clothes-peg to a coffin if required. "Tenterley's" was part shop, part workroom; and it was a recognised meeting-place, for politics, news, or mere informal sociability.

The garden door in Mr. Desmond's garden wall gave on to the lane that divided Tenterley's from The Domain garden wall. It was only a three or four minutes' "step" from the little garden door to the shop. Miss Desmond waited in the playroom for her brother to come back; then, hearing Mary, called to her to say the children were there. Mary duly resumed charge; and cautioning her not to let them play near the picture and risk breaking the glass, Miss Desmond left the room and went into the garden. The flowers in the house wanted changing; and those

in the garden wanted picking and snipping, and a vigorous removal of dead blossom and leaf. Engrossed in the task, she lingered until the children's tea-bell rang.

"Half-past five," she murmured. "I must get these into water. Lucky there were no callers to-day!"

She gathered up her spoils and went in. Luttrell, evading pursuit by Mary, banged into her, laughing and saying he was sorry and racing on. May raced after him, calling out, "Mama says not make such a noise!"

Miss Desmond entered the drawing-room. Her sister-in-law was there, gazing after the children, a book in her lap; and an expression, too slight to be perplexity, or worry, yet partaking of both, puckering her forehead.

"*Must* do these flowers!" explained Miss Desmond. "I ought not to have left it so late."

She proceeded to collect the wilted flowers in a newspaper, and carried them out, returning for the vases. Mrs. Desmond watched her, still with the faint expression of trouble.

"Where is David?" she asked presently.

"I don't know," said Miss Desmond, arranging an arrogant spray to better advantage.

"I don't hear him anywhere," murmured Mrs. Desmond, helplessly. "Wasn't he hanging pictures?"

"He *was*," answered Miss Desmond; "but he must have finished long ago. There was only one more. He went to get more nails, and I went to do the flowers."

She was just finishing her floral arrangements when there was a noisy incursion of Lennox.

"Oh, M'ma," he burst forth, excitedly, "the pupses were so lovely, and Mr. Raymond says I may have one if you'll let me have it, if I don't have it too young —will you let me, M'ma?"

He was kissing her and rumpling his tumbled head coaxingly against her, and holding her with his rather grubby hands; and she smiled absently as she answered.

"If your father lets you, dear, I don't mind. Will it be a very big dog? I don't think a very big dog——"

"No, M'ma, not very big. Only half big. And I'll teach it to be *very* good. You'll ask P'pa, won't you? To let me?"

She kissed him with a sudden laugh.

"Go and have your tea, dear; you are a little late, you know. Mary won't be pleased. Yes; I'll ask your father. I don't think he will mind. Gently!" as he gave her a rapturous hug. "And what a dirty pair of paws—look! Wash them quickly, dear, and be off to tea. Don't keep Mary waiting."

"I won't be a minute, M'ma," he promised, rushing off.

"I wonder where David is?" said Mrs. Desmond; and now she was genuinely puzzled. He was always there for the children's play hour.

Hubert and Hero, who had their tea first, came toddling in, fresh and dainty from a wash, and demanded Papa, to toss them up to the ceiling. Papa's

absence was a grievance and the pucker deepened in Mrs. Desmond's brow.

The other children came back presently, and Mary arrived to carry off the babies.

"I wonder where your father is?" queried Mrs. Desmond, as they surrounded her. "Where is Mr. Desmond; do you know, Mary?"

"No, Ma'am," said Mary, surprised. It gave her quite a turn, she told Cook.

"He never finished er picshers," said Luttrell, with much emphasis; "and Hubert, he fell and bumpeded his head, *ever* so hard, and cried. And if it had been on er glass and not on er framed, he'd have broked it. Wouldn't he, May?"

May nodded, very vigorously, and endorsed the verdict.

"Not finished the pictures?" exclaimed Miss Desmond, and broke off abruptly. It seemed amazing, and she tried to think back.

"No. Er Lost Lamb's still on er floor in er nursery."

"How very funny," said Miss Desmond, slowly and reflectively.

"What makes it funny?" asked Mrs. Desmond, a little flush showing on her creamy cheeks.

"Well; he had no nail that would do for that picture —he wanted it to have the same as the others, a long nail—and there were none left. Brookes was at the stables and Lennox with Mr. Raymond, and Mary was with you and I had the babies; so he went off himself to get them."

"To get what? Where?"

"To get some more big nails; to Tenterley's."

"Do you mean he went to Tenterley's when Mary was with me, and hasn't come back? That was before four!"

"Yes. Mary came back to the playroom about ten minutes after he had gone, and I went out into the garden. It never struck me he hadn't come back. I could easily not have heard him pass in the garden. But you know how they gossip and gossip at Tenterley's!"

"How strange. He must have met someone and gone home with them. He can't be all this time at Tenterley's."

Mrs. Desmond was almost at ease again. It was most unusual for Mr. Desmond not to be back for the children's play hour, and still more unusual for him not to leave word, or send word, of his whereabouts. But it was hardly disquieting.

"I don't think he could have gone home with anyone like that," objected Miss Desmond, her eyes very wide. And as Mrs. Desmond looked for enlightenment, added:

"He had on his green baize apron, and no coat, and no hat, and his hands were all dirtied— "

She stared aghast. Where could he be, all this time, in that get-up?

The flush on Mrs. Desmond's face deepened. She rang the bell, with determination.

"To Tenterley's, did you say?" she asked Miss Desmond, who nodded. "Send Brookes down to Ten-

terley's, at once," she ordered, when the maid came, "and ask what time Mr. Desmond left the shop and which way he went."

The children went on with their games, playtime shorn of much of its delight by the absence of the versatile and amusing Mr. Desmond. His wife and sister, full of curiosity, but not acutely uneasy, did not discuss his non-appearance further. Lennox took advantage of the occasion to give himself grown-up airs and show off to the others.

"Brookes say, Ma'am, that Tenterley has been all day over at the Manor Farm, and isn't home yet. Mrs. Tenterley, she say that Mr. Desmond never came near the shop, not this afternoon."

Moore was an old servant, daughter of Mr. Desmond's nurse, and almost one of the family. But the two ladies waited until she was gone before discussing the situation further.

"Thank you, Moore. Is Mary ready for the children? Say good-night and run along, pets."

They said good-night, with the usual protests and lamentations and injunctions that Papa was to be sure and come up and say it to them in bed. Then Mrs. and Miss Desmond faced each other.

"I wonder if anything has happened," said Mrs. Desmond. Her face was deadly white, now.

"But what could have happened, Honoria?" asked Miss Desmond, half-laughing, half-distracted. "What could have happened, between here and Tenterley's?"

"But he never got to Tenterley's," insisted Mrs. Desmond.

After a few more agitated remarks the bell was rung again.

"Moore, will you and Brookes go down the lane and search and see that the Master has not fallen in either of the ditches. And go on to the village, and ask and see if anyone saw him this afternoon; and call at The Domain and at the Rectory, and at the Doctor's, and see."

"Yes, Ma'am," said the amazed Moore, demurely.

Brookes wanted to know what the Master was wearing, and the sensation was very marked when Miss Desmond described his condition.

Tenterley was home, but could add nothing to his wife's information. The Domain, the Rectory, Doctor Willett's, even the Blue-Nosed Man, were drawn blank. The lane—as unsinister and debonair a lane as could be—held no trap, no corpse, no pitfall or gin. The expedition, accompanied by Tenterley, returned, shaking off with difficulty the attentions of the constable and the bell-man, as wise as it started.

Later on the Rector called again, to be quite sure that he had understood Brookes's guarded query, and to see if there were anything wrong. The actual facts staggered him; and he did not know what to say. When he left, it was to seek Dr. Willett, and consult with him about what was to be done without alarming the ladies. The two of them eventually repaired to the sleepy little police-station and arranged to have the

village pond dragged. This was done, with no results, at four o'clock next morning.

By breakfast time that day, the whole of Lower Domain knew that Mr. Desmond was missing, and that the ladies, and the household at The Meadows were distracted with grief and anxiety.

CHAPTER III

BEWILDERMENT

THE mysterious circumstances, no less than the actual disappearance, threw the little village into a state of stupefaction. Not only Mr. Desmond's own family, but the humble acquaintances who knew him as a fussily kind and managing neighbour or employer, took the matter deeply to heart. Nothing else was talked of, for a good deal longer than the "nine days" of wonder.

The bewilderment, the utter absence of explanation, the impossibility of believing either that anything serious could happen to Mr. Desmond between the garden door and Tenterley's; or that he could deliberately absent himself coatless, hatless, and in a green baize apron, made their brains whirl. Thought was cut off from every avenue of search; no solution appeared to be within the realms of credibility.

When at length, and sorely against her instincts, Mrs. Desmond was persuaded to send for the police; and when, after a day or two of futile local muddle and messing, a man came down from Scotland Yard, the tale was such that the London agent would hardly believe he was being told the whole truth. Like all

the other puzzled people who came to give help or advice, the detective gazed in perplexity at the picture of The Lost Lamb reposing on the playroom floor beside the still expectant step-ladder. Like the others, he poked and pried in the tool-cupboard, still disordered with the search for nails. Like them, he questioned and cross-questioned the now terrified Miss Desmond, who racked her brains for details of the work, the conversation, and the minutest incidents of the afternoon of her brother's disappearance.

Like Brookes, Tenterley, and the local constable, he searched the lane for trace or clue. By this time, it was so trampled back and forth that to hope for a guiding footmark was useless. Like them, he inspected the ditch on either side—bordering the Eagleton's tennis-court and The Domain wall on the one side, and the continuation of The Meadows wall and the bit of grazing ground that The Meadows and its neighbour, The Leas, shared for their Alderneys on the other—in vain. He even asked and received permission to make a thorough search of The Domain grounds and the Old Tower.

Like them all, he owned himself baffled.

To the local constable he unbosomed himself.

"Must have planned it all," he suggested. "Sly old cock."

"Couldn't be done," said the local man, shaking his head. "Nowhere to hide, or change, or get away from. No vehicle; no way out except the Main Road, Fairlands, or the village. Couldn't be done, not till after dark; and it was broad daylight."

"If he'd planned it," went on the local man, after a pause, "he'd have had a bogus letter, from his stock-broker or someone, asking him to run up to London, so's to give himself time to get away without being searched for."

"He's done better than that," said the Scotland Yard man, shaking his head. "He's got clear away while you've been searching them lanes and dragging that pond."

"Well, if he's done it on purpose, we've got no right to prevent him, nor yet to follow him," said the local man, with a slight loss of temper, "so we can save ourself the trouble, if that's the way you look at it."

"That will prove to be about the way of it, you mark me. And the family lawyer up there, and the brother, they say his affairs is all in order, and there'll be no trouble, nor money scandals—no speculation, nor embezzlement, nor liabilities—no reason at all to interfere with his liberty. It's a rum go; but there you are!"

And there they were, and there they remained.

There were agitated visits from Mr. Harry Desmond, brother of the vanished gentleman, and Col. Lennox-Luttrell, father of Mrs. Desmond, and Mr. Beaumont, family lawyer from Gray's Inn; and these gentlemen offered rewards and put advertisements in the home and colonial press and even put private detective agents on to work. The private detective agents were intolerably busy for a prolonged period. They ran on several false scents, and annoyed a number of perfectly harmless people, and were

threatened with a ducking in the pool by some of the market-garden men whose heavily-laden carts lumbered up to town every night and whose day's work began when other people's was ending. The detective agents concealed themselves under a tarpaulin on one of the carts, to overhear the conversation of possible accomplices in the Desmond crime; but market-garden men are not chatterers and spend most of their time on the road in sleep, trusting to their horses. An irrepressible cough gave the detective agents away.

The Desmond family had much difficulty in dissociating themselves from this supposed attempt to prove that the market-garden carters were of murderous tendencies. A quiet, law-abiding, slumbrous class, these men were; and popular. The private detective agents slackened in their zeal after the uproar, and faded discreetly from the scene, to start fresh scents elsewhere; and the reputation for lynx-eyed vigilance and acumen attributed to them by certain writers of romance not based on true life, faded with them.

And by degrees, the search died down.

"It do be the quarest thing I ever heerd tell of," said the bell-man, to one of the informal gatherings at Tenterley's; "and it do be quare, too, that I shouldn't be a-belling of him. It do'ent se-am right, not to be a-belling of him."

"It's a tur'ble bad business," said Tenterley, shaking his head. "A gennleman like that, so simple and straight-forrard in his ways and so reg'lar—not one of the kind's allays running up to Lunnon or off to Boolong, like some of them there over to Fairlands. A

nice, God-fearing gennleman, as gooed to Church twice't every Sunday, and so took up with his missus and his childer—"

"What I wants to know is, where's he gone and how's he gone," said the postman, sententiously. His profession gave him a poor opinion of human nature.

"When *you* seen all the love-letters *I* seen," he was in the habit of saying, darkly; as one to whom the secrets of the public were laid bare.

"There's lots would like to know *that*, Bill Black. If us knew that, there'd be no more to know."

Bill Black said "Ah!" with intense significance, and a sort of I-could-but-an-I-would expression.

"He's gorn off with a gay loydy, if you arst me," grinned the coalman. He, too, had few illusions.

"What did *I* say?" asked Bill Black, of no one in particular.

"In a green baize apron, wi'out's coat and a-nammer in 'is 'and?" enquired Tenterley, incredulously. "Goo on!"

"More likely, he's been done to his death with the hammer," suggested the schoolmaster. With the organist, a quiet little man who loved gossip, he had dropped in to hear what was being said on the topic that was engrossing everyone's attention.

Tenterley wagged a foreboding head.

"Foul play, I'm feared, Mr. Turton. You're right."

"Foul play? But never a mark, or a sign, or a scrap of anything torn, or a drop of blood! No place where there are signs of a struggle, or where a body has lain —and it is fairly soft underfoot, still, after last week's

rain. How could he be got away, or disposed of, without signs?"

Thus the organist, not sceptically, but searchingly.

"That's a fac'," agreed the coalman, who was flippantly disposed. "And as he culdn't a-bin carried off, he must a-walked. Took his 'ook, on his own shankses —that's what he did."

"Where *to,* and how didn't noobody see him? There's only through village here to Somerton, and all the girls coming back that way from Soap Works, and up Fairlands to station. And then there's the Main Roo-ad, miles of it, to Slatford. And noobody to see him? Goo on."

"Must have been taken up to Heaving in a Chariot of Fire," said the postman, solemnly; and though they were all a trifle shocked, they laughed. Postman, he don't care for nothing nor nobody. He'll come to a bad end, surelye; said the village.

"They do tell," began the bell-man, clearing his throat, "that there wuz a picter fell. It do be powerful onlucky, fur picters to fall. I mind, when th' old Squire—the old 'un afore this 'un—died so suddenlike, there wuz a picter fell. It be allers onlucky, they do tell. The servants, up to The Meadows, they do be pruperly frightened."

"Pure superstition," said the schoolmaster, promptly, sniffing up the breeze of battle. "It was the picture falling that set him to work, and that sent him out for nails; that's all *that* had to do with it, but it might have been anything else! But if people *can* think something foolish, you may depend on it they

will. I'd like to give those servants a bit of my mind."

There was a general murmur in response; whether of assent or dissent was not plain. The bell-man, unconvinced, continued to mutter,

"There wuz a picter fell, anyway, and I allers heered tell it were powerful onlucky."

"Sooperstitions is queer things," said Tenterley, in a non-committal fashion.

"An' so's disappearances," said the flippant coalman.

"Do ee mind Jack Bowman?" nudging the postman with a coally elbow, whose contact caused the postman to dust his uniform sleeve carefully.

"I got to account to Gov'ment for my uniform!" he remarked, resentfully. "Yes. I 'member Jack Bowman. Did a guy with that yalleraired gurl of Meddon's, as purtended she'd gorn to sarvice. You aren't thinking—?"

"Thinking's free," replied the coalman, with an unholy smirk.

"Pos'man, he laugh at everything," began Amos Johnstone, harking back. He was rich Farmer Johnstone's brother who had been sold up, whom Farmer Johnstone had taken on, at very stingy terms, to work the market-garden side of the farm work. "Mr. Desmond, he were a gentleman, as Tenterley here knows full well. He wouldn't a-played a dirty game like that, he wouldn't."

"I didn't say anything about dirty games," expostulated the postman, grinning. "What's there dirty about a Chariot of Fire? If 'twere good enough for

'Lijah, Mr. Desmond might be proud to be seen in it."

"Only he wuzn't seen in it," objected the bell-man.

"That's our loss," said the cynical coalman.

Old Johnstone took this ill, and the subject dropped. It was felt to be a trifle personal and delicate. Johnstone had a son who was a wild 'un; he had been peremptorily sacked by the older Johnstone for his unhandsome dealings with the market produce and had disappeared too—not mysteriously like Mr. Desmond, but disgracefully.

Everyone was sorry for Amos Johnstone. He was a harmless, sorrowful man, widowed and lonely; and the rich brother was a hard master and close-fisted.

The schoolmaster and the organist strolled away together, continuing the discussion by fits and starts as they went.

"It really is a mystery," reflected Turton. "Isn't it? There doesn't seem any possible solution. One's common-sense recoils from any suggestion that can be made!"

"And one's common-sense recoils equally from the idea that there is no solution," responded little Browning. "Funny how the uneducated mind fixes on the supernatural. 'A picter fell.' How they love anything like that!"

"Fools," said Turton, with heat.

"And yet a picture did fall," laughed Browning, "and led to the most extraordinary mystery and disaster. At least, it may be neither, of course, because the man may turn up any moment. He can't really be very far off!"

"I have very little expectation that he is alive," said Turton, sombrely.

Browning was silent for a moment, then observed, "I am sorry for those two poor ladies. Dreadful for them."

And so it was—dreadful.

No trace of the missing Mr. Desmond was found. The minutest search revealed nothing that led to any conclusion. No inquiries produced results. No clue was unearthed, no solution discovered. It remained an absolute, impenetrable mystery, as baffling as The Sphinx. None could shed light on it; and the fate of the missing man remained unknown and as time rolled on was quoted, with unction, as one of the famous disappearances which have defeated detective ingenuity.

Opinion wavered. Some, who only knew Mr. Desmond slightly, believed him to have been sly and faithless and the tainted hero of an unsavoury romance. Others, like the Rector, the staunch Turton and Browning, Tenterley, and the whole household at The Meadows, believed him to be the victim of a murderous outrage. To them, Mrs. and Miss Desmond gave their warmest gratitude. Others, again, favoured a theory of mental aberration; and some just loved the whole story for its mystery and its endless and lurid possibilities. It was discussed over many a fireside, and struck terror and dismay into many timid hearts. And by degrees it became an old story, dimly remembered, to be from time to time revived, discussed and again forgotten.

CHAPTER IV

THE FLIGHT OF TIME

FIFTEEN years passed, slowly obliterating with their ceaseless grinding the sharp edges of recollection. Young folk grew to maturity; maturity withered to age. The grave garnered its usual harvest, and eternity replenished as it stripped the world, with green lives to replace the sere and yellow. Change and decay, birth and death, the immutable laws, took their accustomed toll, leaving none untouched.

Fifteen years made a considerable difference to the Desmond family. Lennox was twenty-six and married, with two children, having followed the tradition of early marriage in his father's family. Luttrell was at Oxford; May had just come home from a trip on the Continent. The twins were between seventeen and eighteen, inseparable when not at their respective schools, and full of life and spirits.

The whole family was remarkable for good looks. Between Mr. Desmond's English fairness and Mrs. Desmond's copper and russet, a scale of colouring had been evolved that was arresting. Lennox was the darkest, with reddish moustache and chestnut hair, a

rich colour and bright, hard blue eyes. Without being handsome, he was of most attractive appearance and manner, which cloaked the domineering, carping nature from the observation of acquaintances. May was her aunt Hermione over again, her freshness and youth, and red, white, and yellow spring-time colouring making the older lady look faded by contrast. Luttrell was an engaging youth with roguish grey eyes and yellow hair and the most girlish red lips and little white teeth; the twins were corn-coloured as to hair, peach-like as to skin, and with eyes as blue as flax-blossom. They were all tall and well-made, Luttrell being the smallest. All were addicted to sports; and what they did they did well.

But the beauty of the family was undeniably Kythe, born close on nine months after her father's disappearance. She had masses of soft fawn hair with yellow streaks, eyes a rich blue-grey with dark fawn lashes and thick smooth brows, skin creamy and smooth like her mother's, and perfect teeth. She was going to be a beauty; with her looks and an elusive, aloof, dreamy something that recalled her mother but yet had an entirely individual charm. No one quite understood Kythe, or had ever "found out about her, inside," as Hero complained. She was, beyond question, her mother's favourite, and Mrs. Desmond followed her movements with pathetic questing eyes.

Aunt Hermione had never married. Mrs. Desmond clung so to her, during the years of her bitter trouble, that she put aside all idea of leaving the poor woman. The only offer to do so was not, it must be owned,

overwhelmingly attractive; but it was averred that the Rector, now a widower, was waiting his chance. Aunt Hermione was still a very good-looking woman, with a whimsical outlook on life that made her extremely good company. The household relied on her far more than on its mistress.

Mary was now the young ladies' maid, instead of nurse, and Moore was still parlour-maid, grey, wrinkled, but indefatigable. Cook was dead, and her niece, the kitchen-maid, succeeded to her place and her emoluments.

Brookes had an assistant, young Tenterley, whose father still made and mended for the neighbourhood, though the encroachments of trades unionism were beginning to create difficulties for him. He had been called a "black leg" in the bar of The Blue-Nosed Man; and although the landlord had interfered hotly and made the unmannerly agitator go elsewhere to agitate, Tenterley was "shook." So he expressed it.

The Meadows had been subjected to various modern improvements—electric light, two more bathrooms, new fire grates, and gas stoves for cooking in summer. It was a charming house. Mrs. Desmond's step-mother, a soulless person, had urged her to leave the neighbourhood and "get away from depressing influences"; but nothing would induce Mrs. Desmond to move.

She was much changed. After Kythe's birth, she resumed life with two broad streaks of snow-white hair above her temples. The babies occupied her much, and she insisted on having almost sole care of the

new arrival. Then she went back to her reading; but books would lie open in her lap, the pages unturned, her eyes fixed on vacancy. Her looks remained; even as she aged, she aged becomingly.

She would go for slow walks, alone if possible, but later accompanied by Kythe; standing at places where roads met, or at any corner, crowded or otherwise, and looking round and about as if in search. In later years she contracted the habit of holding long conversations with herself, sometimes almost audibly; and accompanying these monologues with suitable gestures, facial and otherwise, and movements of her head and hands, entirely oblivious of her surroundings. It was these peculiarities that gave rise to a wide-spread belief that the poor lady's mind was unhinged.

It was not so; but it all made Lennox very angry. He was often irritable with his mother and not infrequently rude to her. Grown-up, he allowed himself a tone of sarcastic banter that made his aunt feel murderous.

Every year when the dreadful day came round, Mrs. Desmond shut herself up, only appearing at meals. This never failed to anger Lennox, who called it morbid, and idiotic, and said it got on his nerves. Once he denounced it as sentimental self-indulgence; but his aunt dealt so faithfully with him that he never said *that* again.

The brothers and sisters chafed under Lennox's hard yoke. He everlastingly reminded them that he was head of the family in the absence of his father; and he made strong efforts to set aside the dominion of

Aunt Hermione. He lived in the Temple and came down, with his wife and babies, every week-end, "to see how things were getting on," giving orders liberally, and interfering with the outside men servants when he could not do so with the inside women. Even Mary, who had always adored him, had been heard to declare that Master Lennox do take a lot on himself, and that's a fact.

There was a row royal between the brothers when Luttrell came home and found the room he had occupied from boyhood converted into a night nursery for Lennox's babies, without anyone's sanction having been obtained, Aunt Hermione being away for a short visit. Nothing was sacred to Lennox and his wife. Their visits were difficult times, times all too often of strain and irritation.

The fifteenth anniversary of Mr. Desmond's disappearance was upon them; and Lennox, as he frequently did, announced his intention of coming down for that day—a Friday—to begin his week-end. He hated the day; but enjoyed an opportunity of protesting against what he disapproved of. Mrs. Desmond heard of the decision with a sigh.

Every September the bitter-sweet past returned to her, overwhelming in its poignant appeal. The dear, dear days when David hammered, and whistled, and wheeled wheel-barrows and plied the garden mower or the garden roller or the garden shears, or put in panes of glass, or invented patent foot-rests for her chair; and romped with his children, and read her amusing

tit-bits from the paper at night; and knelt beside her low chair in their own room before getting into bed, rubbing his boyish head against hers and kissing her throat and saying, "Ready, darling! Come along"; or "How lovely your hair looks to-night! What have you been touching it up with, you sly pet?" or some such tender nonsense—how long ago they were! How she missed him. O God, how she had missed him!

She had nothing to reproach herself with. She had loved him truly and passionately, had given him all a woman could give, and no shadow had ever darkened their devotion and their confidence. Her immersion in books had never annoyed or disconcerted him; and he had never lacked sympathy and understanding, for her or from her. They had suited each other perfectly. The thunderbolt that had broken their lives in sunder was still inexplicable, still utterly without source or reason; unintelligible.

She remembered every detail vividly. One of her secret and most profound sorrows was the knowledge that these details had grown blurred and dim to others, and to no one but her was it any longer a matter of passionate feeling. She longed to keep it alive; yet to no one could she confide all she panted to say. A dumb spirit held her in thrall. Kythe, Hero and Hubert, ought to know about it, be interested in it, be able to tell their children about it; but she could not bring herself to discuss it with them. They might think or feel *like Lennox*. That would be unendurable.

She knew Lennox took the view that his father had

gone off willingly and abscondingly. The knowledge stood between her and her first-born like the Angel with the flaming sword.

"We were so proud of our baby," she remembered, with unavailing regret. "How David loved to see him laugh. He invented a rocker—that never would rock. Why has our son turned out like this, so hard and unbelieving?"

Of Luttrell's mind she knew less; but realised that his brother's views had been put to him ruthlessly.

How kind everyone had been, she sighed. Her brother-in-law, who had since made pots of money and come to live on the Fairlands Manor property—he had been ever so kind and helpful, coming to live there mainly to be of use to her. Such a comfort, he was, with various matters in regard to the boys and their schools.

About business, too. He had arranged for money to be advanced, and had tided her over a most difficult time with great tact and generosity. The money position had been most difficult; but Mrs. Desmond's own father had helped.

How angry he was! Her father—not Harry Desmond—Col. Lennox-Luttrell. He lived in the South of France with his second wife, a card-playing lady of considerable means. Mrs. Desmond was his only child, and he came flying over to England on the first hint of his daughter's having been "badly treated" by the rascal she had married. The situation, when he arrived at it, struck even his irascible volubility dumb. He was a vehement exponent of the murder and out-

rage theory, converted to enthusiastic belief in the honour of his son-in-law by the generous and devoted helpfulness of Harry and Hermione Desmond.

"Awfully fine people," he assured his many cronies. "Splendid characters. He couldn't have done anything crooked, one of that family. Money affairs in perfect order, every penny left to Honoria and her children, not a paper or a letter of the least equivocal kind—not a thing that required explanation. Amazing. Amazing."

His whole-hearted championship of her David warmed his daughter's sore heart; and when he died a year later, leaving her very comfortably off, she felt doubly forlorn and bereaved.

The substantial income which she inherited enabled her to hold out against the often-repeated suggestion that she should make an application to have her husband's death presumed. Since coming of age, Lennox had pressed hard for this, and even threatened to do it without her consent. She had, at last, told him sternly that if he did, he should never set foot in the house again; and as, under the will, the house would be hers, he forbore, with a bad grace, and left the subject.

So sore did this leave her, and so deep the breach between her and her son, that she was unhappy for days. At last she wrote to him and promised that if nothing transpired by then, she would make the application when Lennox should be thirty; and he wrote back, expressing his satisfaction, and asking her pardon for having hurt her.

How the old memories stirred and struggled, as this

anniversary came round. She remembered the insolent stare of Lady Gotto of Gozo, who drove past her and pointed her out; all the carriageful of smart people turning their heads to stare. She remembered the weeping sympathy of the old servants, the kindly offerings sent by the villagers, the gruffly expressed condolences of the market-garden men, the curiosity of little May when she heard some ribald remark about her father having gone off with his light o' love, and the child's searching queries in respect of this new phrase. She remembered those long, long, lonely nights, wide-eyed, with the unceasing rumble of market-garden waggons plodding their way to town, as she lay listening, hoping, wearying. She remembered her first pitched battle with Lennox, when she realised what his opinion was. She remembered the Rector's unshaken friendship and companionship, and the hours his gentle wife took charge of the older and more noisy children. And the visit—the very first visit—of Lady Katherine Gervase, wife of the old Squire at The Domain. The frigid, exclusive, prematurely aged woman came, in an impulse of neighbourliness, to express her deep regret at the blow that had fallen on the adjacent household.

"I knew your husband by sight, Mrs. Desmond, and I am sure—I count myself a good judge—he was incapable of baseness or intrigue. He has been the victim of some terrible outrage. Heaven grant the criminals may be brought to justice."

Lady Katherine called on no one; and this spontaneous act and tribute was most comforting.

Since then, relations between The Meadows and The Domain had remained pleasantly friendly, ripening of late into cordiality. Lady Katherine had highly approved of the dignity and reserve with which Mrs. Desmond met her trouble and her staunch loyalty to the missing man. She rarely made a new friend, and never dropped one; from that time no social observance that would accentuate the fact, that Mrs. Desmond of The Meadows was a friend of Lady Katherine's, was ever omitted on either side.

CHAPTER V

THE DOMAIN

SQUIRE GERVASE died five years after Mr. Desmond disappeared. The tedium of his long illness was somewhat lightened by the visits of Mrs. Desmond and her family, who by a process of elimination, became almost the only neighbours, excepting the Raymonds, and the Leighs of the Manor Farm, whom The Domain recognised as gentry and received as visitors. With his death, the tie between the elder lady and the younger became closer.

"It is the best part of myself gone," said Lady Katherine, curtly. "*You* know. Nothing much seems worth while, now. I have not even his children to bring up, as you have. That is all finished."

Mrs. Desmond understood, and her heart ached afresh, for herself and her friend.

"His sufferings are over," said Aunt Hermione to her sister-in-law. "It was dreadful to see him so crippled, and wincing with pain. And he looked so as if the family troubles had been too much for him. I never saw a man with so much the look of mental distress eating him away."

"Did he strike you like that?" asked Mrs. Desmond.

"I always thought—he had something on his mind."

"Something special, do you mean? Or just general?"

"I never could make up my mind," said Mrs. Desmond, absently. "He had some great distress. It never left him."

"Well, he had enough to worry him, poor man. And they have always taken their troubles hard, about money and everything else."

Squire Gervase and Lady Katherine had two sons. The eldest was killed in a North-West Frontier campaign; the second went to Australia, after the failure of the family finances. There he made a desperate struggle to succeed in an environment totally unsuited to him. His wife was half Creole, a Catholic; half-educated, too, and wholly impossible to bring home to The Domain. The marriage was a further blow to the proud old man.

The Creole lady, apparently, had gleams of perception, for she wrote, an illiterate scrawl, saying she knew she could not bring her sons up well, that she was too busy to bother and there were no good schools; and that if the old man liked he could have the boys to bring up himself in the old place.

The Squire jumped at this. The boys were sent home, one a well-grown youngster, who could shoot, ride, and do many things that surprised the grandfather; the other a small frightened thing several years younger, in deadly terror of the sister who, quite unexpectedly, accompanied and chaperoned them—a black-browed, frowning imp who bit and kicked like a colt under any attempt at coercion. She was the

eldest of the three and was of ungovernable temper and totally impervious to rebuke.

They went to school, and both lads were destined for the Army. The eldest, Hugh, married a horse trainer's daughter while at Sandhurst, and joined in her father's business. He was weak rather than vicious; and his associates were shady. His name figured later in a suit relating to the pulling of some horses by boys in his employ. The disgrace of it hit the old Squire hard. He never held up his head again, and would hear no excuse for his grandson.

The second grandson, Arthur, did well and went well, and made up in some measure for other disappointments. He was dearly loved by Lady Katherine and the old Squire and was looked on as the heir, to the exclusion of his father and elder brother.

News of the father's death in Australia brought fresh distress. Driven to drink by his wife's almost open infidelities, he died in his cups, the widow then marrying one of his farm hands. This man kept her straight from sheer terror, by flogging and the most brutal threats; and Hugh, engrossed in the horse-training business, allowed the precious pair to run the Australian station for him. The knowledge was bitter to the old people at The Domain, who could not check the flood of gossip emanating from young Hugh's grooms, stable-hands and racing and betting associates, all of whom seemed to be in the intimate confidence of his wife's relations and friends. The training establishment, it must be explained, was in the inconveniently near neighbourhood of Lower Domain; and although

Hugh made no effort to force his presence on his family, there were frequent embarrassing encounters.

And worst of all was the girl, Teresa. Frantic scenes and rows scandalised the grave household; pranks of unheard-of levity resulted in expulsion from school at fifteen; no form of authority gained her respect or submission. Lady Katherine owned to Mrs. Desmond, on the one occasion on which she discussed her grand-daughter, that she had no knowledge enabling her to handle or influence a girl of that type.

"There was nothing for it," she sighed, "but to send her back to her mother. As the step-father was able to manage *her*, he might also be successful with her daughter. At all events, I thought he ought to try, as the kind of scandal she was likely to bring about our ears here was more than I could contemplate. They were going to send her to a convent where there was very strict discipline, we understood; but I have no notion if the experiment turned out well or ill."

Mrs. Desmond received these confidences, on the only occasion the subject had been broached, as not to be revealed. She was much surprised, therefore, to find that the story had also been told to the Rector; and he surmised that the plan had not worked well and that Lady Katherine could not still her self-reproaches.

"How could she help it?" murmured Mrs. Desmond. "I cannot see that it is her fault. She did her best."

"She did indeed," said the Rector; "and it is enough to shake one's trust in Providence to see such undeserved sorrow and affliction fall on people like that,

whose only concern has been to uphold a high standard of honour and righteousness. If we were all like that——"

"They are dear people," said Aunt Hermione. "But sometimes, Mr. Raymond, for my personal taste, I like something a little less unbending—just for every-day wear, you know. It isn't that I want to be wicked—"

"I wonder how you would set about it, if you did?" he laughed.

"It would depend on how the fancy took me," she tossed back. "I might begin in church, imitating that new curate of yours. Why don't you give him breathing exercises and cure that snuffle? And why do you let him say, 'O Lord, shave the Queen'?"

"Is he as bad as that?" said the Rector. "Dear, dear. I really must listen. I have got so in the habit of relying on them for a little sleep—"

They all laughed.

CHAPTER VI

THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

It was about six years after the Squire died that two strange bits of news came to be told on the same day. Luttrell came in, white, excited and mysterious.

"I say, Aunt Hermione, I want to speak to you," he whispered, breathlessly.

She followed him into the playroom. It was still called so.

"They have found a body," he said, hoarsely. "Dug it up. They are saying it may be Father's."

"Where?"

"Near Farmer Johnstone's manure heaps, where those old sheds are."

His young face was bleached with horror, his voice husky.

She gave the boy a glass of cold water and made him sit down. He was shaking all over.

Brookes was sent out to find news, and a note despatched to the police-station. By-and-by the doctor and a policeman called.

Mrs. Desmond listened in silence, her face becoming more and more haggard. The body had been found by accident; a hole was being dug for dead

leaves, to make some good mould. There were bones, and something else, some dreadful remains, in the last stages of decomposition. Lime had been used, and had destroyed a great deal, all clothing on top, etc. The clothing underneath was mere mould and mud, eaten, soaked away. It was the body of a big man. Impossible to say more; and only possible to guess how long it had been there—years. The skull was beaten in.

For the first time in her life Mrs. Desmond fainted.

They were all very gentle with her, and hovered round her, and brought her loving messages from The Domain and the Rectory and the humble friends who were stirred by this revival of an old tragedy. None doubted that it was at long last a clue to the Desmond mystery.

Harry Desmond and his wife came in towards evening. They had been to the police-station.

"He must have turned back," said Aunt Hermione, sorrowfully, "and gone round the front way instead of coming in by the garden, to get into the paddock." They always called the bit of ground between the bottom of their garden and the backs of the village houses, the paddock. It was shared by The Leas, next-door, and a narrow path between the two gardens, entered from the front road, gave access to it.

"Something must have attracted his attention there, and he must have gone to see, and been attacked."

"What does Johnstone say?"

"He does not know what to say. He chose the

place himself for the digging, so obviously he knew nothing about it. It was his brother found it."

Aunt Hermione was far more moved by the effect this had on Mrs. Desmond, than by her own feelings. Her grief for her brother had worn off its edge; she was dry-eyed, though sorrowful. Poor David, struck down like that, when he was so happy and healthy and young—it was tragic and terrible. It brought it all back again, for Honoria. She had never worn mourning for him; would she, could she, now?

Anyway, the long suspense was ended. So said Lower Domain.

Hero and Kythe knew something, which they whispered together, precocious in their sympathy and understanding of their mother.

"Mummy always hoped he would come back, like he went. This will be the worst of all."

Kythe nodded, her eyes dark with feeling.

They were not supposed to have been told the eerie tale but Hubert wormed it out of Luttrell and then passed it on to them.

The blow to hope stunned Mrs. Desmond.

She lost herself, again and again, in the mists of fanciful conjecture with which she was wont to mitigate her woe. Imaginary situations, leading to a clue, and to discovery, had occupied and beguiled her fancy for so long, this assumption of a finality she had always dreaded was a bitter blow. She turned from it to her dreams, and lost the thread of people's remarks, and was so absent and hazy, they kept her under con-

stant observation. All came dropping into her room, with attempts at conversation.

"I don't know how you feel, Honoria," said kind Harry Desmond, "but some people prefer certainty to suspense—it's a poor choice, anyhow. Poor old David."

"I don't think suspense is as hard as no hope," said little Kythe.

Mrs. Desmond stroked her head, as she nestled beside her.

"What I am glad about in one way is," went on Harry, "that they can't make any more insinuations now, against his character. Death has done that for him. More shame to their evil minds."

"Dishonour is the worst of all," said the Rector gravely; adding, "that reminds me of the poor old Squire. Have you heard of the new arrivals? I hope it does not mean more trouble for poor Lady Katherine."

"Who has arrived?" asked Aunt Hermione.

"The grand-daughter—you remember, the one who was so unsatisfactory—she has sent her children home to the old lady. A boy and a girl; they arrived this afternoon, with a Chinaman nurse—a man nurse."

This was news indeed. The children were about the age of Kythe and Hero, and would be company for them, in a place where there were few children of their own class. The Chinaman nurse opened up vistas of supreme entertainment. What *would* The Domain servants do with a Chinaman nurse?

"Does he put them to bed?" asked Hero, shaken

in every fibre of propriety. It was a monstrous proposition.

Even Mrs. Desmond laughed.

An inquest, of course, was held, and a verdict of murder of an unknown man by some person or persons unknown, was the result. Conviction settled down on the community that it was the body of the missing David Desmond, the story of whose disappearance was raked up and retold with a thousand adornments and inaccuracies. Among the picturesque embellishments with which the tale was trimmed, was the falling of the picture, and the consternation this created in the deceased gentleman's mind. It was to all who understood signs and portents an infallible warning of death, and he knew it. He had said those very words; though who he had said them to, remained as great a mystery as the name and identity of his murderer.

It was poor befogged Amos Johnstone who found the remains; and his evidence was very pathetic. He, too, had had a loss. His boy, who had been spared prosecution by Farmer Johnstone, had promised to come and say goodbye to him, before leaving the country. He had never come; and the poor man was unwilling to believe that hardness of heart was the explanation. He was just as anxious to claim these mournful remains as those of his son, as Mrs. Desmond was not to have them identified as those of her husband. But Desmond was a taller man, and of bigger build, than the young market-gardener; and poor

Johnstone had to admit, mournfully, that their size put it out of the question that the remains should be those of the engaging young rascal for whom he cherished so deep an affection.

"Pore old Johnstone," Tenterley said to the schoolmaster, "he can't seem ever to get over it, his son goo'ng off like that w'thout saying goodbye and all. He would rather he wuz dead than that ardarted."

"Robbed the old man, didn't he?" asked Turton, idly.

"He did, and took up with bad characters besides, and his uncle would a-sent him to prison if he hadn't a-promised to goo away and git out of the country. And he's never wrote his pore father a line. Pruper young rascal, he were. Good thing for her, pore woman, that his mother died before it come to that."

The question arose, what was to be done with the body found on Farmer Johnstone's land? Would Mrs. Desmond claim it? Would it be buried as David Desmond? There was intense curiosity on this point, and at The Meadows it was raised by Mrs. Desmond herself.

Lennox was there, and Luttrell; and Uncle Harry and Mr. Beaumont, the lawyer. The Rector, also, and Dr. Willett, Mrs. Desmond, Aunt Hermione, and Aunt Nell.

"What do you think I ought to do?" she asked, in her troubled voice, with a catch in her throat.

No one really knew. It *was* a difficult point!

Luttrell finally settled it.

"Let us do it, Mummy dear; it can't do my father any harm, if it isn't him; and if he comes back we shall be so glad we won't care who's buried as who. If it is him, it *ought* to be us."

"That is so," said the Rector; and the lawyer and Uncle Harry agreed. Lennox made difficulties, but had nothing better to suggest.

So the remains were laid beneath a stone inscribed "Sacred to the memory of D. D. Desmond," with a date and a text; and Mrs. Desmond put on mourning. But she never went near the grave.

Lady Katherine was immeasurably kind and went out of her way to advertise the friendship.

"A long-drawn martyrdom, heroically borne," she said to Harry Desmond. "Could you not get her to go away, now, for a change? I am sending the children to the sea before the weather breaks; why not all go?"

And so they did, Lady Katherine accompanying them. She looked old and strained, and seemed to need the change more than any of them. There was something in her expression that looked like dread.

Hubert and Hero and Kythe, and Launcelot and Guinevere Gervase became great friends. The Australian children were big and strong, good to look at, and good company, with a fund of knowledge of ships, niggers, snakes, and alien excitements that enchanted their new comrades.

The Chinese nurse was so useful that Lady Katherine said she did not know how she had ever done

without him. When they got back to Fairlands the intimacy progressed, and hardly a day passed without the young people seeing each other.

The days of Victoria were at an end, and Edward VII. had come to the throne, before the new children came to The Domain. Arthur Gervase, their uncle, who had seen service and got rapid promotion in South Africa, came home about the same time as they arrived. He shrank from the very thought of his sister, but liked his nephew and niece and voted them "jolly kids"; and took them rides in his car—then a new and rather wonderful toy. The children from The Meadows also shared this treat, and developed a sort of hero-worship for the cheery soldier-man. Luttrell thought him a splendid person, who never put on side nor came the grown-up over you. Mrs. Desmond liked him too.

"I can't think where my sister picked up another Gervase," he laughed. "She never writes, you know, except a picture post-card to say there is another child, or I am godfather to one of them, or something like that. But Gervase isn't a common name at all; I always wonder who he is."

"All sorts of fine names are common overseas," said Aunt Hermione. "I have some friends who have been in Canada, and there are people with wonderful old names cleaning the streets and lighting the lamps."

Gervase laughed.

"Younger sons of younger sons, I suppose," he said. "Steady descent as well as ancient! Slithering down, in fact; into the gutter. And the hitherto-unheard-ofs rocketting up to the peerage—that's the way of the

world. Who does the girl remind you of? Is she like my grandfather?"

"I don't think so; no, not a bit."

"She is like someone—the boy is the dead spit of his mother. My grandmother feels them rather a responsibility; I must try and be more at home now and help her with things."

It was a year or two after this that Major Gervase first became aware of Kythe's remarkable brand of beauty. There was a Christmas party at the Manor Farm, and he joined in all the revels with goodwill and zest. At the close of a pretty figure-dance, stage-managed by a racketty nephew and niece of jolly Tom Leigh's, all the couples had to pass through a doorway and under a great bunch of mistletoe that hung there. As each couple came through, they had to stop on the further side of the door and exchange kisses with the couple that followed them. They were all a little too big, or a good deal too young, for the pastime to be quite appropriate.

Major Gervase, with Aunt Hermione, paused to greet the Rector and Kythe. The Rector's eyes twinkled merrily as they met Aunt Hermione's.

"Got you!" he murmured, kissing her crimsoning cheek with great *empressement*.

Gervase held out his hands to Kythe and looked into her eyes, startled at the unexpected beauty of them. The girl put her lips to his, a little shyly, but as naturally as she would have kissed her uncle. The touch of her soft mouth sent the blood racing through his veins, and he kissed her with a hot pressure he

was ashamed of next moment. He could not see her face, and had to move on and make way; but he saw that she turned a deep-stained cheek to the next salute.

All night he tossed unrestingly, thinking of the startling depths of the eyes and the lips that returned—yes, he was sure they returned in some slight degree—his kiss. Was it because she was only a child, or because she felt and understood?

He was not blackguard enough to try to see her again; and did not meet her until his next leave. And the time drew on, until as we have already said, fifteen years had elapsed since the disappearance of Mr. Desmond. Gervase was again at his grandmother's, and his coming was acclaimed with joy by all the young people.

The great-grandson and daughter were giving Lady Katherine much happiness and gratification. They did well at school, had nice manners as well as high spirits; and were trustworthy and good and affectionate. She loved them, and her grandson, Arthur, exceedingly. No news came of the children's father or mother.

Lady Katherine was getting to look frail now; but her faculties were unimpaired and her health excellent. She still kept complete control of her household and did her own accounts. Arthur was, however, to all intents and purposes, master at The Domain.

Once more Arthur Gervase was struck with the beauty of little Kythe, and her grace and charm. He would have given much to know whether the alluring droop of her eyelids, and the avoidance of his gaze,

were due to habit or to consciousness. She and Hero were brought forward a good deal for their years, as May, much their senior, was lonely in the absence of her brothers, and was dependent on her younger sisters for companionship.

CHAPTER VII

FATHERS AND MOTHERS

LAUNCELOT and Guinevere, the Gervase boy and girl, were really younger than Kythe, but so much older in character and experience, as well as in looks, that the difference in age was not noticeable. The boy was black and white, like his mother; fine, soft, black hair, growing in little twists and twirls, that made his head an artistic joy; a thick white skin that had a swarthy look for all its whiteness. The Creole blood showed plainly enough. He had bright, penetrating hazel eyes, and a jolly, wide-lipped smile.

The girl was different. She had rich chestnut hair and blunt features, pleasant without being really pretty. Her eyes were very blue, and her skin freckled but fair. She looked as thoroughly English as her brother looked foreign. She was a busy, cheerful young person, neat-fingered and handy, with a love of doing anything that was not exactly her job.

The young people were all together the day before that fifteenth anniversary. The summer had been short, autumn was setting in early, and a fire was blazing in the playroom. Launcelot was making toast, Kythe was plying the butter-knife, and Hero was performing feats of stickiness in connection with

toffee that would not disadhere from a sheet of oily paper.

May, a sort of visitor in the playroom, lounged in the most comfortable chair, piled round with cushions. Luttrell and Hubert were inspecting, one by one, flies tied by Guinevere; and found themselves obliged to confess that they could not have improved upon the results.

"I never saw such fingers," grumbled Luttrell. "I don't know where you got them from!"

"They are mine now, anyway," grinned Guinevere, holding out a not entirely clean pair of hands and then hiding them behind her back.

"Mother used to say," called Launcelot, disjointedly, from the fire, where he was finding it difficult to protect his face from the blaze, "that she had father's hands. He was always doing things—like her, mother said."

"Did she?" responded Guinevere, carelessly. It was not a subject in which she took much interest. She knew she could "do things," and held it cheap accordingly.

"Do you remember your father?" asked Luttrell, with some curiosity. The subject of fathers was one full of possibilities.

"No," said Guinevere, unconcerned. "Don't think I ever saw him."

"Did he die when you were quite a baby?" asked May, sympathetically. How strange, she thought, pityingly, that Kythe and this girl, such friends, should neither of them have known their father.

"Oh, he's not dead," said Guinevere, lightly. "At least, I never heard so. Did you, Lance?"

"Don't know," answered Lance, gruffly. "No one does."

To say the young Desmonds were surprised is to put it mildly. It *was* a coincidence.

They stared, in silence, too well-bred to ask questions.

"Gran said not to talk about it, when I asked her once," went on Lance, scrambling to his feet. "And mother boxed my ears, when I asked *her!* So I suppose they don't mean to let us know; but a man —a friend of Mother's—told me afterwards that no one knew, and perhaps it was best. I don't know what he meant, though."

"Don't you want to know, most desperately?" asked Hubert, quaintly earnest; and Lance said, "Oh, I don't know that I care much."

"There were lots of people, where Mother was, who didn't know things like that," said Guin, sagely. "It wasn't ever any use asking anyone anything of that sort, but no one minded about it, and it made no difference. It didn't seem to matter there. I don't know why it seems to matter more here. It doesn't *really* matter, you know!"

"*We* thought it mattered, awfully," said Luttrell, with some heat.

The matter-of-fact, unemotional outlook of the Australian children, born and bred in the underworld, was a shock to their friends. The Desmonds

had always been conscious of a difference; but it had never been so sharply accentuated. The intimate nature of the subject made the gulf in their outlook yawn more widely.

"Well, it wasn't any use," retorted Guin.

"What wasn't?"

"Thinking it mattered. It didn't help. And it wouldn't make things any different for us, no matter what we thought, so what would be the use of our worrying?"

"When you mind things," said Kythe, "it isn't because it's any use, it's because you can't help minding."

"You don't feel what you like," put in May. "You feel what you must—what you are made like."

"That's it," said Lance; "and we aren't all made to feel alike. Toast's ready, and *I* feel like eating it."

There was a consensus of agreement on this score, and the subject of fathers was dropped.

May spoke about it afterwards to Aunt Hermione.

"But doesn't it seem extraordinary, Aunt Hermione?"

"Their mother was always very queer, dear. I am hardly surprised at anything concerning her. She gave Lady Katherine a world of trouble, with her terrible temper, and her uncertain whims and changeableness; and she was expelled from school for being unmanageable—oh, and other things, too. There were all sorts of tales about her goings-on at The Do-

main—you cannot stop servants gossipping, even the best of them; and the village people knew things too. *She* took after *her* really dreadful mother, who got hold of poor Hugh Gervase—Major Gervase's father—before he was twenty, and ruined him. Hugh seems to be an unlucky name for them, both Hughs came to grief. I am not surprised Teresa's husband should have left her, though. What could you expect a man to do with such an ungovernable creature?"

"Oh," said May, enlightened. "You think he deserted her?"

"Most probably. Why? Do you think it was anything else?"

"I didn't know, Aunt Hermione. I really hadn't thought. I wondered, rather, if he were in prison!"

"Now what made you think of that? Of course, that is quite possible, too. She was very likely indeed to marry someone who might eventually find his way to prison! However, it is not our business, May dear, and it is not a nice thing to try and find out our friends' secrets; so don't let us talk about it."

May kissed her.

"Not to Lennox's wife," she agreed, hastily; and Aunt Hermione gave an involuntary laugh and frown.

Lennox's wife was so very superior!

Arthur Gervase called that evening after dinner, bringing a message from Harry Desmond, with whom he had dined in town. Full of the painful possibilities which the young people's chatter had disclosed, Aunt Hermione alluded to Lance and Guin as "poor children!"

"Why 'poor children'?" said Gervase, surprised. "Is anything the matter?"

"Oh! I only meant—I was thinking—it is very impertinent of me, Major Gervase, to allude to your family's affairs; but they were chattering, as young people will do; and it seemed so sad."

"I think they are lucky, all things considered," said Gervase.

"Well, yes. That is what I mean. It *is* sad that it should be luck for them not to know their father, or to be with their mother. I don't want to be prying, you know that; but do you have any news of—her? Does she ever write?"

Gervase shook his head.

"She never did write more than a post-card, and now we have not heard for ever so long. The very first news she ever sent me was that Guin was born; once she dropped a card to say I was Lance's godfather! She never even bothered to tell Gran of her marriage, or where she met her husband."

"Was it not at your father's station?"

"Haven't a notion. I asked Lance once, but he did not know, and I hate the idea of pumping the youngsters, and so does Gran."

Aunt Hermione nodded.

"I remember her just a little—in the old days," she said. "Such an attractive-looking creature. I only saw her once or twice, and never spoke to her; but no one could forget her. She looked like a thing caught wild—snared."

"And ready to bite and claw," laughed Gervase.

"She had the devil's own temper. How terrified I was of her! Poor Gran. Well, I must move on. Good-bye, Miss Desmond."

Down the grassy walk, now embowered in roses trailed over arching frames, he went to the garden door from which Mr. Desmond had gone out never to return. Under the arching rose trails he met Kythe.

"Not in bed, little girl?" he chaffed.

"Not yet," said Kythe. "I like the garden best, at night. I wish I could stay out all night."

Her voice was delicious, rich and low, with a hint of suppressed laughter that contrasted with the deep pathos of her eyes. He thrust his hand through her arm, and said,

"Come and see me out—lock me out safely."

Her soft warmth, her light, sure tread, her nearness, went to his head. Outside the gate he lingered, her hand in his.

"Good-night," she said softly; "you won't 'disappear,' will you? This was where it happened."

There was the lilt of a half-laugh in her voice. It was the first time she had ever jested about the disappearance that had shadowed their lives with mystery.

"Would you mind if I did?" he asked. And, as she gave no answer, but lifted a laughing face to his, he kissed her in a fashion he flattered himself was brotherly.

"Don't let us make a hobby of it," said Kythe, mischievously. "I mean disappearances, not kisses."

The little puss, he thought! She danced away, leaving him with an uncomfortable feeling that he

would not like her to tell Mrs. Desmond he had kissed her good-night at the gate.

His face flushed in the darkness as he realised he had done a thing that was equivocal; and as he strolled down the lane to The Domain, he called himself names for giving way to what was, excuse it as he might, a nasty impulse. So concerned was he, that he hardly saw, and did not notice, a man, standing on the narrow footpath opposite the door in The Domain wall, that opened into the lane just as the Desmonds' garden door did. The man was staring fixedly at the door, and did not move as Gervase, unseeing and unheeding, put his latchkey in the lock and let himself in.

The door opened into a part of the premises where the remains of the Old Tower, grimly defying Time, reared its gaunt grey head above the more modern brick wall. The arched doorway with massive metal reinforcements gleamed, well polished and smooth, in the faint light. Gervase strode down the tiled path; and the soft padding of the other man's steps as he went up the lane on the grassy edge of the path, kept time with his more resonant footfalls.

Gervase was more than a little stirred by his encounter with Kythe. Of love affairs he had had several, but he had been cautious even when impassioned. His father's fate, and his brother's fate, snared while they were still boys by women older than themselves and of a lower class, had been a warning to him. Both father and brother had ruined themselves socially and lowered themselves morally, by their association with low and unscrupulous women.

As for his sister, her dubious career, of which he knew but little, was certainly the result of her evil inheritance. As disappearances were part of the atmosphere in which his lot was cast, he devoutly hoped that this sister, whom he had cordially disliked and feared, and the casual husband whom she had picked up God knows where, and who appeared to have discarded her at the earliest possible moment, might disappear permanently from all their lives. Her children were all right—jolly kids. He did not know how that wildcat, Teresa, had managed to produce anything so decent; but, of course, good blood crops up and comes out as well as bad. He would always look after Lance and Guin, even if he had children of his own. . . . The visions conjured up by this thought engrossed him for the rest of his waking hours; and he dreamed jumbled dreams of kissing Kythe again, and finding that Teresa was watching, and was laughing at him.

CHAPTER VIII

THE ANNIVERSARY

NEXT day the Lennoxes arrived, by as early a train as was compatible with their eight o'clock breakfast.

"Mother not visible, I suppose?" was Lennox's sarcastic greeting, when Aunt Hermione met them in the hall.

"That goes without saying," put in Mrs. Lennox, tartly.

She was a hard-faced young woman, with a chirping, complacent voice that was infinitely irritating. She snubbed Lennox mercilessly, and contradicted him incessantly; and far from giving them satisfaction, this made the Desmonds almost more angry than Lennox's attitude towards them!

They fitted themselves in, with the two whining, fretful babies, who were always crying and complaining; and Mrs. Lennox aired her usual grievance about the bleak aspect of the nursery, and the superior advantages of Luttrell's room, which was so much better suited to children. The usual silence greeted these remarks.

"Why have those children got their hair up?" was her next attack, alluding to Hero and Kythe. She and Lennox had been at the sea-side for a month,

so found a great many things that wanted speaking about, on their return.

"Hero is not a child," answered Aunt Hermione, "and it is time her hair went up. Kythe does it to keep Hero company, and because it suits her."

"Absurd," said Mrs. Lennox. "It should not be allowed. It makes her look ten years older."

"Grown-up, in fact," put in Luttrell. "Kythe's older than most of us, ain't you, Baby?"

For no reason apparent, Kythe crimsoned.

"What are you colouring up for?" asked Mrs. Lennox, sharply.

"Do leave the children alone, Dot," said Aunt Hermione. "I can't stand that constant discussion of them before their faces. It really is such bad manners, and young people are quick enough to pick up bad manners as it is."

"Well, what next?" asked Dot, with a cold, offended stare. Lennox stared too. Was the worm actually turning?

"I'm sorry I am bad-mannered," said Dot, with dignity. "It is the first time I have been told so."

"Pity!" said Luttrell, *sotto voce,* and Hubert got very red and nearly choked.

"What did you say?" asked Lennox, angrily.

"Did I say anything?" returned Luttrell, blandly.

With an effort, all recaptured their manners and tempers. But by the time lunch was ready Hero and Kythe were in the grip of a fit of giggles, and Hubert kept indulging in spasms which he vainly endeavoured to camouflage as coughs.

It was a relief when the gong sounded. Lennox rose, with a quotation appropriate to the noise.

"'Sound the loud timbrel,'" he began; adding, "there isn't any poetry about gongs, is there?"

"You don't call Moore 'poetry,' do you?" asked Dot, with scorn.

"Why not?"

"Moore?" with greater scorn.

"He ranks with Burns, anyway. Come along, don't argue."

In the dining-room, Lennox inspected the cold dishes on the side-board.

"Gladstone used to say"—he began, amiably.

"I know what you are going to say," interrupted Dot; "and it wasn't Gladstone. It was Pitt."

Lennox looked at her in speechless exasperation, and started to whet the carving-knife.

"Gladstone used to say," he began again, presently; only to be cut short once more.

"Pitt, Lennox. You really should not make such a display of ignorance."

"I can't think what you married me for, as you always appear to think me wrong, and take a pleasure in making me out a fool," said Lennox, rather too loudly.

"I certainly did not marry you for your brains," promptly retorted his spouse; which was unfair and untrue, as her husband was a very shrewd and very successful business man.

These scenes were not altogether unusual, but they never failed to grate on the fastidious susceptibilities

of the Desmonds. For husband and wife to wrangle, and to wrangle openly, was hideously ill-bred. Luckily the servants did not wait at lunch.

They all felt on edge and were silent. Sympathy was entirely with Lennox. Aunt Hermione struggled to find something to say, so as to throw herself into the breach; but could think of nothing. Lennox whetted the carving-knife furiously, and in a strangled voice asked,

"Hot or cold, Aunt Hermie?"

"Had you not better wait for your mother?" rebuked Aunt Hermione, with icy displeasure—all thrown away on Lennox.

He always took the end of the table and the carving, without invitation, on his visits. All hated it and none had the nerve to resist his airs of authority.

"Need we?" asked he, in answer to his aunt's rebuke, with a slight, very slight intonation of contempt that made them all angry again. "She is sure to be late to-day. Oh! Here she is."

Mrs. Desmond came in, giving an absent cheek to her son and his wife, and taking her accustomed seat with her back to the door. The joint was at the other end of the table.

She looked like an exquisite, old-world picture, in the *crêpe lisse* widow's cap she always wore now, with the troubled eyes below the smooth, creamy brow. Her chestnut hair was still thick and luxuriant, though powdered with grey; the white streak on either side still vividly distinct.

Unfolding her table-napkin absently, she continued, with her lips and her eyebrows, her hands and her shoulders, some animated argument or discussion her fancy was elaborating. At the other end of the table, Lennox, carvers in hand, began an insolent mimicry of her gestures, exaggerated to suit his idea of the humorous; and a muttered version of what he imagined her conversation might be.

Only his wife laughed. The others were, as usual, bursting with rage, and took not the least notice of him.

"He is imitating you, Mother," chirped Dot. "Naughty boy, look at him! That is just the way you do, when you let yourself wander off. Do look at him, and then you will know what it is like."

Mrs. Desmond turned a perfectly grave, perfectly blank face on this jocosity, gazing at Mrs. Lennox as if she were a curiosity.

"Be good now, dear," continued the arch Mrs. Lennox to her mother-in-law, "and leave off, and attend to your lunch and your family."

It was all as if a child, or a person senile and imbecile, were being admonished. With rage in their hearts, the young Desmonds clattered their knives and forks and glasses and plates, and made as much noise with their chairs as they could.

They all talked at once, to drown Mrs. Lennox's detestable waggishness. Above the racket, Lennox called again, in authoritative tones,

"Hot or cold, Aunt Hermie?"

"Cold, please," answered Aunt Hermione, striving after calm; and Lennox moved to the sideboard. "I never can resist a 'wealandammer'——"

She broke off abruptly, as the hall door opened, and shut with an emphatic slam.

Someone was in the hall; someone whose movements could be heard plainly, the dining-room door having a trick of slipping its catch and swinging a little open.

It was a welcome interruption, and relieved the strain.

"It is Major Gervase," cried Hubert, joyfully. "Shall I see?"

He left his place, the unlikelihood of Major Gervase coming in without ringing, striking Aunt Hermione as he did so. Opening the door, he pulled it close after him as he saw a stranger.

A big, elderly man stood there in the hall, taking off his coat and hanging it with his hat in the recess curtained off for hats and sticks. Smoothing his hair with his hand, he walked towards the door which Hubert had closed behind him, giving an almost menacing glance at the boy, who moved instinctively aside. Pushing open the door, he entered the dining-room, Hubert following him and standing just inside the room.

Lennox, flourishing the carvers, looked round from the sideboard and paused, at first in expectation, then in blank amazement. Hubert slipped round to his place by Hero; they all, except Mrs. Desmond, stared and stared and stared.

Broad and heavy, grizzled, lined, bronzed; rough-

ened in some indescribable way that yet did not conceal the fact that he came of gentle stock; with a something of menace, something of quest in his glance; the man stood, inspected and inspecting. His fine blue eyes, keen and searching, roamed round the table.

"Where is your mother?" he asked, abruptly, in a clear, fresh voice.

Aunt Hermione rose slowly, gripping the tablecloth that she felt give and slither towards her under the strain. The room was swimming round her.

A knife clattered to the ground. Kythe stooped to pick it up.

"Your mother!" breathed Aunt Hermione, thickly.

At the sound of his voice, Mrs. Desmond collected herself from afar. For a moment she thought it part of her fancy, which dwelt eternally on one idea; but the next moment the wandering thoughts cleared and she looked round.

Deep into her eyes he looked. The cap, the hidden hair, and the back view which it so altered, had deceived him. He came a step nearer, and she rose.

A sound—hoarse, coarse, hungry, strangled—came from the man's throat. It sounded hardly human. There was something shocking, that no one of them could define, about it.

Mrs. Desmond looked queenly; proudly and superbly composed. Only her hands shook, betraying the struggle for calm. The faint, pink stains that excitement brought to her cheeks were deeper and brighter; her eyes glowed softly.

"There is my mother," said Lennox, in answer to the question. He was staring, staring, at this man; and something familiar was beginning to dawn in connection with the face. Was it like someone he knew? Who?

His eyes wandered round the table, and lighted on Hero and Hubert. It was there, the likeness; it was like them.

The thought of his father, believed to be lying under that new stone in the peaceful churchyard, never entered his head.

"Do we know this gentleman?" chirped Mrs. Lennox. "Hadn't somebody better introduce him?"

She was pleased and exhilarated with the notion that there was some cause for embarrassment. What fun! was her only thought. The truth never dawned on her for a moment.

Still Mrs. Desmond stood facing the man, who stood close to her without speaking, but taking hold of her arm in a masterful, possessive way.

"David!" broke from Miss Desmond, hoarsely. How well she remembered that gesture.

"Yes," said he. "All right. Hadn't we better all sit down? The joint will be getting cold."

He pressed Mrs. Desmond into her chair and walked to the further end, holding out his hand for the carvers. As one hypnotised, Lennox surrendered them to him.

"We want another place," said Mr. Desmond. "Move up that side, Hermie; and Lennox the other side; that's right."

He spoke as one accustomed to give orders. The breezy, masterful manner his sister remembered and recognised had something added to it, something abrupt and final.

There was a general shifting of chairs and of covers, and clinking of plate and glass. Mrs. Desmond sat very still in her place at the head of the table. The children dared not look at her.

It all happened far more swiftly than it takes to tell. From Hubert's leaving his seat, and the entry of the stranger, to the moment when all the seats were fitted in and Mr. Desmond's voice was ringing out its clear, peremptory, "Hot or cold?" to each in turn, was only about two minutes. Even now they did not quite understand.

When he carved the leg of mutton, he picked out the dainty pieces for Mrs. Desmond.

"*And* a little piece off the knuckle-end, not too hard," he said, as he had said many times on such occasions.

Their eyes met across the table.

He carried the plate round to her, reaching across Hubert's shoulder for the cauliflower, and over Mrs. Lennox's for the onion sauce. He put it in front of Mrs. Desmond, and stood, waiting for her upward glance of thanks.

Standing there, looking down on her, meeting her eyes, seeing the white hair thick about her temples, the heavy masses visible through the fine web of the cap, and realising what that cap was for, the queer sound came again from his throat. Putting his arm

round her neck, his hand under her chin, he turned her face up and stooped to it, kissing her lips, her eyes, and her lips again, with audible kisses, and strange sounds of endearment between them. In some dreadful way it seemed as if he were quenching an overpowering thirst.

There was something uncivilised about the way of it.

It was almost indecent.

To a family accustomed to ways of the most fastidious reserve, it was absolutely painful. Their mother!

Even Mrs. Lennox felt that.

For husband and wife to wrangle in public was bad. For husband and wife to kiss each other in public—it was unspeakable. Aunt Hermione, amid her own discomfort, felt sorry for the children. They all sat in strained silence, looking at their plates and trying not to clear their throats.

As Mr. Desmond stooped, to bestow on his wife those disconcerting caresses, something leaped into sight that they had not noticed before. On the side of his head, deep in the thick hair, but clearly visible, was a scar, that reddened and glistened angrily as they hastily averted their shamed eyes.

"Hot or cold?" Mr. Desmond asked again, when he resumed his place, and ordered—yes, ordered—Lennox to help the cold.

"This your wife?" he asked casually of Lennox, hearing Dot say "dear" to him.

"Yes," replied Lennox, meekly.

"We have been married nearly four years," chirped Dot, but Mr. Desmond did not seem interested, and she collapsed as suddenly as she began.

"Cook hasn't forgotten how to make a 'wealandammer,' " said Mr. Desmond, with a little too much appreciation of the food before him.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"It is Edith, dear, not Cook," said Mrs. Desmond, very clearly, from the other end. "Cook died nearly eight years ago, and Edith took the place."

Again came a faint echo of that sound in his throat.

"She does credit to Cook's training," said Mr. Desmond, a moment later. "Help yourself to more, Lennox. Don't wait for me."

This set Hubert "coughing" again. Lennox looked so meek!

"Who is your young friend, Baby!" asked Mr. Desmond, suddenly.

Kythe coloured again, and looked up enquiringly.

He was not speaking to her, it appeared, but to Hero.

Kythe looked at Hero, and at Mr. Desmond, in an agony of uncertainty. She did not want to say "That is Hero." It seemed absurd.

Hearing no answer, Hero looked up and saw her father looking at her keenly. She coloured too.

"Well?" he asked, with a half-smile, and a peremptory note in his voice.

"This is Kythe," again supplied Mrs. Desmond, the colour burning bright on her cheeks. "That is Hero; and Hubert. Kythe is called Baby now."

He fixed his eyes on her incredulously, meeting hers point-blank. His fell first.

There was a scramble to change the plates. Aunt Hermione felt her heart bursting. The interruption was a relief.

None of the children looked at each other. May and Luttrell clasped eloquent fingers under the table for a moment; that was all. May and Luttrell knew; but even yet, Hero and Hubert, and Kythe, could scarcely take it in and realise.

This was Father!

He had come back.

He was not dead.

He was not ill, or hurt, or marked with ill-treatment. With the exception of the sinister scar, he bore no sign of injury or coercion. He did not look as if he had escaped; he looked rather more as if he had been in command! Everything he said sounded like orders.

Where had he been?

What was going to happen?

"Luttrell," said Mrs. Desmond, in her low, distinct voice, "will you go up after lunch and tell your Uncle Harry? They will want to know."

A quick glance from the keen eyes opposite her. No word of assent or dissent.

"Right, Mother. May? You come too?"

May nodded eagerly.

"Uncle Harry and Aunt Nell *will* be excited, Mummy," cried she, determined to make the best of

things and help them to seem natural. "Who is going to tell Lady Katherine and Mr. Raymond?"

"I will," said Aunt Hermione, unsteadily.

When lunch was over, Mr. Desmond waited, as of yore, for all of them to pass out before him, he standing with his wife to watch them go. With his arm through hers, as of yore, he followed them out, and made for the garden. As of yore, he stood with Mrs. Desmond on the broad shallow steps outside the French window, overlooking the lawn and the riot of roses below.

"The roses look well for this time of year," he remarked.

"They are nearly over now," said Mrs. Desmond.

They walked, side by side, down the paths and over the sward, the gulf between them widening moment by moment. The explanation she had longed for, thrilled at the thought of, waited in patient loyalty for, could give her no comfort now. She shrank from it in every fibre. Indeed, she knew, instinctively, it would not be forthcoming.

The Alderneys, the car that had replaced the handsome bays, the greenhouses and the fernhouse, were all visited before the Harry Desmonds arrived, with shy, reluctant feet, to see with their own eyes the astounding truth.

May and Luttrell made tip-top speed, running part of the way, until they came to the "avenue" in which their uncle's house stood. Then they slowed down, stood still, and looked at each other.

"What are we to say?" enquired Luttrell.

May knew what he meant. She knew that what the foolish words covered was "How are we to make it sound right? What will they think?" For they were no fools; and the thing that had happened was a thing no talking could possibly alter.

It had so long been a matter of creed that Father *might* come back, none had given much thought to, or had knowledge or imagination to realise the fact that such a return would take more explaining than the disappearance. Now that it had happened, it seemed as if there were no explanation possible. The ugly truth stuck nakedly out, that what they had to face was scandal and possibly disgrace; blame for their father, shame for themselves.

"Did *you* know him?" asked Luttrell, after an eloquent pause.

"No," said May. "I didn't think he was a bit like that."

"Nor I," confessed Luttrell. "Did you see Aunt Hermie? She looked awful."

"I felt awful, didn't you? O Luttrell, to think how we have all hoped for it and thought of it, without knowing a bit what it would be like——"

Reality paralysed them. They walked slowly and silently to the big house with the trim gravel drive, that looked so blatantly, so scornfully respectable; and felt small and shady and discredited.

"*What* is that you are saying?" said Uncle Harry, incredulously. "Your father come back? *Come back?*"

Luttrell nodded, with compressed lips. May felt herself on the verge of tears.

"Where has he been?"

"He didn't say—not yet," faltered Luttrell.

At this juncture Aunt Nell burst out crying. May followed suit. Uncle Harry fussed and tch-tched and told them not to give way; and looked from time to time at Luttrell, standing mute and miserable, wishing he could disappear too. When the tears were checked, there was an uncomfortable silence.

"What's going to be done now?" asked Uncle Harry, looking out of the window with his back squarely turned to the room.

"Won't you come back with us and see him?" suggested Luttrell, uncertainly; and May added, still with a suspicion of tearfulness, "That's what we came for."

"I suppose we had better," said Uncle Harry, with sudden briskness, taking command of the situation. "Get ready, my dear, will you? We will go and hear all about it."

On the way down, a rather silent walk, Uncle Harry fired off a question or two.

"How does he look?"

"Very well," answered Luttrell.

"Very well!" repeated Aunt Nell, with a sort of gasp.

"Big, and brown, and——" Luttrell hesitated for the rest. "Old," he added.

"He has a scar," supplemented May.

"A scar?"

"On his head; a horrible place."

They digested this in silence.

"How did your mother take it?" asked Uncle Harry of Luttrell, after a pause.

"You couldn't tell," he compromised.

"She came down to lunch, and looked round and got up and said nothing; and he made her sit down again and made Lennox give him the carvers, and helped the lunch."

"Helped the lunch!" echoed Aunt Nell, feebly.

"What did Hermione say?" asked Uncle Harry, after another stretch of road had been covered.

"She has gone to tell the Rector and Lady Katherine," parried Luttrell, dexterously. "We came here, and she went to them."

Uncle Harry muttered something like "Needn't be in a cast-iron hurry over *that,*" and hit at a stone with his walking stick.

"And Lennox?" he continued, presently. "Was Lennox there?"

"Oh, Uncle Harry," burst out May, with an irrepressible laugh, "Lennox was quite *meek:* and Dot put on her society frills and he took no notice!"

They both laughed at the recollection.

"Aunt Hermie looked awful," declared May, presently, in a low voice, to her aunt.

"I don't wonder," whispered Aunt Nell, on the verge of tears again.

It was with real dread, and hearts that throbbed painfully, that they entered The Meadows.

"Hullo, Harry," called Mr. Desmond. "Here you are!"

And that was all.

The questions crowding to their lips were never asked. This was a stranger. In the guise of David—with David's voice and David's eyes, there was an alien of whom one asked nothing, of whom one was more than a little in awe. One from whom no explanations or apologies would be forthcoming; a close-lipped alien, whose breeding and refinement were overlaid with who knew what weathering—danger, vice, or brutality—none could tell.

"Good God," exclaimed worthy Harry Desmond to himself, genuinely shocked. "What can have happened to him! He looks like an ex-convict."

Aunt Hermione, meanwhile, went to find Mr. Raymond. Since his widowerhood, she had not gone to the Rectory without some kind of an escort, and her unceremonious entry, pushing past old Sarah with, "Is the Rector in? Where shall I find him?" as she made for the smoking-room, left the old servant aghast.

"What hever can 'ave 'appened?" she wondered.

Mr. Raymond took his feet off the seat of the other chair, apologised for having had them there, and shook up a cushion to make it a fit resting-place for her.

"To what do I owe the pleasure and privilege," he was beginning, in humorous vein, when he met her eyes.

"What is it, Miss Desmond? My dear friend, what has so upset you?"

He held both her hands, and felt how she was shaking. His concern grew to alarm, as she struggled for speech.

"David is back?" he bent his head to hear. "David is—— Do you mean your brother? David *back?*"

She looked at him despairingly and nodded, swallowing the sobs that were strangling her.

"But how splendid," he cried. "And how jolly of you to come and tell me! When? Why? How? Where from? I say! This *is* a bit-of-all-right! Sit down and tell me."

He attributed her emotion to joy.

She could not be induced to sit, but leant against the mantel-piece, clutching one of his hands convulsively and avoiding his eyes.

"At lunch. Just walked in and hung up his coat and hat in the hall. As if he had gone out after breakfast."

Her voice was breaking. The tears would not be denied much longer.

"I say! What a lark."

"He simply said, 'Where is your mother?' and started t-t-to c-c-c-arve the joint."

"And what did you all do?"

"Nothing. He m-m-ade us all move up and make a fresh place at the table. Oh, Charlie, he never kissed us or said a word to anyone, except Honoria—except her. Never said anything——"

The recital tailed off into sobs; and Mr. Raymond was man enough to seize his opportunity.

"I can't make head or tail of it," said the Rector, a little later, still holding her and stroking her hands. "Of course he will tell us something—some story one

can repeat? How long is it now? Fifteen years? I never heard such a thing!"

"He has a terrible place on his head—perhaps that is the explanation——"

"We'll ask him," said the Rector, hopefully. "He is sure to have an explanation of some sort."

They went together, considerably later, to call at The Domain. Lady Katherine was in the lower garden; and there they found her, pacing the long walk with the herbaceous borders.

"This is very kind," she said, with her old-world courtesy. "You will be of great service, Mr. Raymond, if you will be so very good as to help me up the terrace steps. But it is not time yet for me to go in. Presently; presently."

Her breeding would not let her notice their agitation, nor allude to the unusual nature of their call, together.

"Miss Desmond has come to tell you some news, Lady Katherine," began the Rector. "Some very startling news."

Into the old lady's face leapt something like fear.

"My brother has come back, Lady Katherine," said the younger woman, in a trembling voice.

Every vestige of colour drained from Lady Katherine's face. She stood for a moment absolutely still, as if struck into stone; then tottered forward a few steps on her stick, Mr. Raymond catching her by the arm just in timé to prevent her falling.

They helped her to a garden seat and made her lower her head between her knees while they called

a gardener and sent him for some brandy. The butler came, and the housekeeper came, and m'lady's own maid came, and the Chinese "nurse" came; and between them they got her on to the sofa in her morning-room.

Peremptorily she ordered them all away and insisted on hearing the rest of the story from her callers.

When they had told all that could be told, she turned her head wearily on the cushion, her lips moving, slow tears trickling down her worn cheeks. Like Mr. Desmond, she made no attempt at explanation. After a while she asked them to ring for her maid; and when they left, said,

"Let me know—to-morrow—anything more there is to know."

They promised; and got away in a state of uneasiness nothing could exceed.

"What does she know about it, Charlie?" asked Miss Desmond, feverishly; and he could only shake his head, and advise her to say nothing about it to anyone else.

Mr. Raymond had never cared to face anything less, than this meeting with his old friend. He had once gone to the prison gates to meet a man he knew well after a term of hard labour; but he had not felt so awkward even then as he did now.

Yet there was nothing but, "Hullo, Charlie! Still at the old job? You've put on a bit of embonpoint, old man. If you don't take care you'll lose sight of your toes for ever."

The hand-shake was hearty, the greeting was natural,

it was all as if he had gone away for no more than a holiday. But there was an impenetrable barrier holding them back; a determination, far stronger than their love, their curiosity, or even their resentment, which checked enquiry and inspired fear, and made of this man an alien and an enemy.

And the sinister scar remained unaccounted for. No one durst ask, or allude to it. It was plainly noticeable, and with any exertion would redden and glisten. His fingers often sought it, as if feeling for a tender place; but he never spoke of it, and none knew how he came by it. It added to and was part of the sinister atmosphere that surrounded his personality.

CHAPTER IX

"THAT DEAD MEN RISE UP NEVER"

ARTHUR GERVASE, coming home from the Manor Farm, where he had been having tea with jolly Tom Leigh and his racketty niece, heard the extraordinary news of Mr. Desmond's return with a mixture of amusement and incredulity. The latter predominated.

"Oh, you have got hold of some cock-and-bull story," he said, when old Adams, his grandmother's groom, told him the tale. "The man's dead, Adams. He has been dead for years."

"Begging your parding, Master Arthur, but that's what they are a-saying. It's all over the village. The servants at The Meadows, they told the grocer's cart; and Tenterley, he saw him, hisself."

"Tenterley wouldn't know him, after all these years," scoffed Gervase. "Tell them not to make idiots of themselves, Adams."

"Your Granma," said Adams, with dignity, declining to pursue the topic any further, "your Granma, Master Arthur, she's not so well. Took bad, she was, her ladyship, this afternoon. Parson, he was here; and Miss Desmond."

"Really?" said Gervase, with concern. "I must go and ask after her," and he hurried into the house.

Lady Katherine looked alarmingly white and had palpably been crying. Gervase felt very uncomfortable. He thought she looked very frail and worn, lying there; not a trace of her old spirit. She seemed to have collapsed suddenly.

He chatted in a desultory fashion, trying to amuse her telling her of Tom Leigh and his scamp of a niece, and of the funny little baby-boy, her brother, who used a most dreadful oath, and when asked where he had heard it, answered blandly, Grannie! Knowing benign old Mrs. Leigh so very well, Lady Katherine could not but laugh.

"I hope he got a good whipping, to make him more careful," she commented, with more sternness than she felt.

"Where are the children?" asked Gervase. "I have not seen them to-day. Are they over at The Meadows? By the bye, there is a most extraordinary yarn going about."

Lady Katherine's white cheeks turned to a dull red.

"Adams told me. They are saying the Desmond man has turned up again. Did you ever hear such a thing?"

"His sister was here this afternoon," said Lady Katherine, struggling into a more upright position.

He noted the colour with some surprise, but attributed it to the effort to rise.

"She would have told you, if there had been anything in it, wouldn't she?"

"She did."

"She did?" incredulously. "But is it true?"

"Yes."

"The scoundrel! Where has he been?"

"Ah! Where?"

He whistled.

"Well, I'm blessed. What a blighter. What are we going to do about it, Gran?"

"It is no business of ours," said the old lady, slowly. "Mrs. Desmond is a friend of mine; whatever line she takes, we must be guided by."

"All the same, Gran, one doesn't want to go to the house of a fellow like that! Why, it is years—how long is it?"

"Fifteen years," she answered. It sounded like a knell.

Suddenly Gervase laughed.

"What a queer crowd we are," he chuckled. "Desmond, deserts his family for fifteen years; Mother, sends us adrift; Teresa, deserted by her husband; and Lance and Guin deserted by her! Strange that neither of those two, or little Kythe Desmond, should ever have seen their fathers."

Lady Katherine was oddly silent. Looking at her, he saw she was so white, he feared another fainting attack. Ringing for her maid, he asked what the doctor had said.

"Rest, Master Arthur, and keep quiet, and light diet, and not to talk too much nor see visitors."

"I had better leave her, then. I'm afraid I have talked too much. Let me know if she wants me, or if I can do anything."

He went away and dressed for dinner; and found Lance and Guin in the smoking-room, looking rather disconsolate.

"You look very glum, young people!" he observed.

"Well, it's beastly," said Lance, unaffectedly.

"What is? Explain yourself, pup, as to this thusness."

Lance was silent, unwilling to broach his grievance.

"Hubert's and Hero's father's come home," interposed Guin; "and they thought we'd better not come to-day."

"And can't you manage without them for so much as one day?"

"It's not that," said Lance, impatiently; and again stopped, unwilling to go to the heart of the trouble.

"Hero'd been crying," supplemented Guin; "and Kythe'd been crying, and Aunt Hermie'd been crying, and Hubert wanted to cry too, only he was 'shamed; and May had been crying lots, and so had Mrs. Desmond from Fairlands. We saw her go away."

"Some people cry, you know, Guin, when they are very glad. If they have been very sorry and then become very glad, they often cry."

Guin shook her sagacious head.

"They weren't glad, any of them. Were they, Lance?"

Lance shook his head, not committing himself to speech.

"How do you know?"

"Aunt Hermie said good-bye to Mr. Raymond at

the garden door. She said 'Dreadful, isn't it?' and then saw us coming and said nothing more till we'd gone. She was holding Mr. Raymond's hand tight, and they looked—awful. Kythe's sick, she's cried such a lot. Hero says she's had to go to bed and they don't want Mrs. Desmond to know."

"I saw him," said Lance, suddenly and savagely. "I hate him. He's a swine."

"I say!" remonstrated Gervase. "You mustn't use language like that! Where did you pick up such expressions? You wouldn't like Gran to hear that?"

"And look at Gran," went on Lance, his grievance on top at last. "She's sick too; and you bet it is all because of him."

"Nonsense, silly goose. Gran is ill, poor darling, because she is an old lady and has been doing more than she is strong enough for. What possible effect could Mr. Desmond have on her?"

"I know it's because of him," persisted Lance. "She was ill as soon as the Rector and Aunt Hermie came to tell her. I wish he'd been dead—murdered—like we thought he was."

It was absurd; but this talk with the children made Gervase more uneasy than he could have explained. Their vindictive anger against a man who had done them neither harm nor good seemed inexplicable, in the first place; and it gave him a worried feeling that perhaps they were going to turn out like their mother, wayward, uncontrolled and violent. Then it was curious, if true, that it was Miss Desmond's news that had caused Lady Katherine's illness; and he again

had a worried feeling that what he had said about Mr. Desmond had made her change colour and then nearly faint. And, queerest of all, was the tidings that The Meadows was plunged in grief and not joy; and that Kythe, who held her mother's creed concerning the missing Mr. Desmond, had cried herself sick on account of his return. It was very mysterious.

He could not go and enquire, as Guin said Kythe's state was being kept from Mrs. Desmond. He would not go and call on this man who had come back; and he could not drop in as if he did not know that anything had happened. He was inclined to agree with Lance that it was all beastly.

After dinner, he strolled up and down the lane, going out by the side door and lingering near the door in The Meadows' garden wall. It hardly surprised him that it opened, and that Kythe stood there. She looked as if she, too, were plotting a sudden disappearance!

"Is it your turn?" he chaffed, tenderly. Then seeing that she was too much moved for jest, he took her arm and strolled up the lane with her.

"I thought you were in bed ill," he remarked. "Guin told me."

"I couldn't get to sleep," said Kythe; and then broke out crying.

He consoled her as best he could, and heard her, with intense distress, gasp, "Mother! Oh, poor Mother; Mother," over and over again. From the open French window came the deep notes of a man's voice, and laughter and sounds of good fellowship.

Mr. Desmond was evidently making himself agreeable in the family circle. Gervase marvelled.

He gathered from the distressed girl, when she was at last able to control her bitter weeping, that Mrs. Desmond was one of the friendly party in the drawing-room: that Mr. Desmond had made no faintest attempt to explain his absence or his return; and that no one ventured to ask him.

"Everyone's afraid," mourned Kythe, half-sobbing.

"Afraid of him?" gasped Gervase, shocked.

"Oh, no; not of him," explained Kythe. "Afraid of what he might say; what he might tell. Uncle Harry, and Aunt Hermie, and Mr. Raymond, and all. They don't want to have to know it, if it's—if it——"

She broke off eloquently.

Gervase did not ask any more questions. He had a feeling that it would be like peeping through a keyhole. He got Kythe's thoughts on to other subjects, and sent her in to bed a trifle cheered and comforted. But he went back to The Domain feeling that Lance and Guin were not far wrong in their summing up of the situation.

In their bedroom, that night, Lennox and his wife thrashed things out, in a virtuous indignation that had not yet found its full expression.

"It is going to be a blazing scandal," groused Lennox. "There is no explaining it away. He wasn't ill, he wasn't murdered, he wasn't mad, he wasn't even unhappy. He must have just gone off with another woman—like people used to say."

"It is awful for your mother," said Mrs. Lennox, with an unwonted shudder of sympathy.

"It is going to be awful for us all," returned Lennox. "Did you spot Uncle Harry? He was bowled over. Completely. And what makes me so angry is, he does not seem to have any intention of explaining."

"You ought to make him, Len. For your mother's sake, you ought."

This idea was gratifying to Lennox. He saw himself posing as the champion of the mother he had protected and cared for all these years. It was a seductive idea. He felt he could play the part well.

"Of course, mother isn't fit to look after her own interests. She never was. I can rub that in a bit; but the law will be on his side all along the line, now she has taken him back."

"Well, anyway, give him a bit of your mind."

"He deserves it," quoth Lennox. "A scandalous thing. He really is an awful rascal, and no fit guardian for the girls; nor for Hubert, for that matter. Fifteen years, good Lord. Fifteen years on the randan; and comes back as cool as a cucumber to take things up where he left them off, as if he had only been away for a fortnight! It is incredible. If you read it in a book you wouldn't believe it. You would say it was overdrawn!"

Lennox was very fond of saying that.

The next day was very unlike anything that could have been imagined. Everyone woke up with a sense of big happenings and a feeling of excitement; nothing could have been more commonplace than the actual.

Mr. Desmond came in to breakfast from the garden, bringing a few flowers, as he had always done, to lay beside his wife's plate; and kissing her as he had never done, and as they all disliked seeing him do, when she came into the room. He helped the bacon and eggs, told Lennox to carve the ham and brawn, and then opened the newspaper, looking over the top of it to ask Mrs. Desmond, "Any news in your letters?"

"Not much," answered Mrs. Desmond, quietly. "A handful of circulars, and the painter's bill, and an offer for the heifer, and an application for the chauffeur's place."

"Better let me have those," said Mr. Desmond.

She passed them down to him, not noticing that Lennox detained them in his hand.

"A letter from Mrs. Maitland, saying they will be in London in October, and want to see something of us; and one from Nana's great-niece to say the old woman is a good deal feebler. I think one of us ought to go down, David. She will not last much longer, I am afraid, and that foolish Annie never had wits to face an emergency."

"We can go down next Saturday," said Mr. Desmond, gravely.

Old Nana had nursed Mr. Desmond and trained Mary, and was the mother of Moore.

Lennox still held the sheaf of bills his mother had passed along. Mr. Desmond held out his hand for them.

"Had we not better go into those presently together," said Lennox, in his most business-like manner.

Mr. Desmond looked at him in surprise. Then returned to his newspaper.

"Gives in at once," thought Lennox, putting the papers beside his plate. "One has only to stand up to him and he collapses."

The breakfast was rather a silent one. The girls eyed their mother furtively, striving to find some sign that would give a clue to her feelings. Mrs. Desmond poured out the tea and coffee with steady hand, and with her usual dignity. The troubled look had deepened in her eyes, and the faint crease in the smooth forehead, between the brows, had suddenly cut itself in with sharp intensity. May noted this with acute pain.

Once or twice she seemed to lose herself, as her way was, in her fancies; and the absent, far-off gaze came into her eyes. She pulled herself back hastily, with a little quivering sigh, and concentrated on her duties. Towards the end of breakfast, she lost herself entirely, and one of her whispered monologues was in progress, with gesture of head and hand, when Mr. Desmond caught sight of her.

May and Luttrell saw him watch her furtively, himself watched.

"Mother!" called Lennox, in disapproval. "Don't."

A lightning glance from the keen blue, watchful eyes shot at him.

"Is there a drain more in your pot, dear?" asked Mr. Desmond, on the instant. "Just a drain."

He had always wanted "Just a drain" before finishing.

Getting up, he carried his cup round instead of passing it, pressing his hand on Mrs. Desmond's neck as he waited, and drawing her face to his stooping one as he took the brimming cup. The scar showed, an angry red.

The children turned their eyes away. It was even more hateful than Lennox's impertinence.

Where had "he" picked up these ways? Who had he been associating with? It made them shrink to the very marrow of their bones.

What did Mother feel about it?

Aunt Hermione, who, like Kythe, had swollen eyelids, and a headache as well as a heartache, kept the conversational ball rolling with some credit, ably seconded by Mrs. Lennox, who, in the caustic phrase of the impudent Luttrell, was showing off before the Governor.

"Fat lot he cares for her opinions!" supplemented Hubert. "What are we to call him? Pater? Guvnor? Mr. Desmond? Father"—long drawn out, in some ridicule—"or Papa, like we used. Papa! Pa. How about Pa? Ease combined with elegance; friendly and not familiar. I vote for Pa."

"I don't want to call him anything," said Kythe, fiercely. "He's made Mother more mis'ble than she was, and I hate him."

Luttrell put his arm round her and rocked her against him.

"Gently, gently, Ky. It will make Mother more mis'ble than anything if we row with him. It's a case of open your mouth and shut your eyes, and

swallow the Pa a Good God has seen fit to punish you with."

"Lennox has gone to have a row with him," observed May. She came to take dreary counsel with "the children" because Aunt Hermione had basely deserted her and gone off with Mr. Raymond. May felt too forlorn to stand on her dignity.

"Old Lennox going to row with him! Oh, I wish I could hear. Where? In the smoking-room? Holy Moses, I didn't think Len really had the grit!"

"They are in the dining-room," said May. "All of them—Mother too! He shut the door."

This was serious. However, it did not last long. Mr. Desmond was heard calling to the dog, and Mrs. Desmond went upstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Lennox strolled in the garden. They all went out.

Presently he called,

"What time does the mail go out?"

In English villages the "post" goes out. People do not talk of the "mail." The unfamiliar expression struck them all.

"The *post* goes out at 11:20," called back Lennox.

Mr. Desmond appeared on the terrace, smiling, a letter in his hand.

"Thanks for putting your father right, Lennox. It was always your pleasant way. Who will come with me to the village?"

There was a perceptible pause, during which his face hardened.

"I will," said Hero.

"So'll I," said Hubert.

They confided to each other afterwards that they were afraid not to.

He dropped his letter into the box without their seeing the address, bought some stamps, stopped at Tenterley's for some nails, buying them and passing the time of day with the old man, as if he had been there the day before.

"Powerful long time you've stopped away, Sir," said the sturdy old man, who was not afraid of prince or peer.

"Yes," answered Mr. Desmond. "Time does fly. Those trees of Barton's are doing well, Tenterley. It was a very good speculation, wasn't it?"

"I call it an investment, Sir, not a speculation to plant a tree," said the old carpenter.

"So it is, so it is. It is what every man should do. Plant a tree, beget a son, and strike a blow at the right time—that's wisdom, Tenterley."

"You've left something out, Sir."

"What?"

"Do his duty, Sir."

"Very true, Tenterley. Is that Turton over there? Why, so it is."

Mr. Turton felt quite as strongly as Tenterley, but was not minded to express himself. He lifted his hat and passed by gravely; and went to find Browning and give vent to his amazement that the Desmond man's family were out with him. As if nothing had happened! What a world.

The question of what to call their father was a real difficulty. He had always insisted on "papa,"

because that was what he called his own father. But "papa" was manifestly absurd.

When Hubert impudently took matters into his own hands and addressed him as Pa, in a dashing, off-hand manner, as if he had done it for years, they nearly exploded with joy.

Pa it was; and Pa it remained. Kythe alone called him Father.

Lennox adopted a tone of haughty aloofness. His father, apparently much amused, everlastingly roasted him.

"Did you volunteer for South Africa?" asked Mr. Desmond.

"No," answered Lennox, emphatically.

"Why not? You weren't married then?"

"It was no business of mine," retorted Lennox.

Mr. Desmond laughed.

Lennox resented his dethronement bitterly. His encounter with his father had been sharp and not sweet.

"Give me those letters?" Mr. Desmond said, questioningly.

"I want to know something of where you have been and what you have been doing these fifteen years, before we hand you over control of all our affairs again," said Lennox, not without dignity. "For fifteen years this place has been run on my mother's income, left her by my grandfather, Col. Lennox-Luttrell."

Mr. Desmond's keen eyes showed bright for a moment between the narrowed lids.

"It is practically hers. She has kept it up, she

has paid the insurance, the servants, the ground rent, and rates and taxes. We have managed without you, and you have left us to manage as best we could. Before you interfere here again, we have a right to know what you have been doing."

"The *right?*"

"Yes. The right. How do I know, for instance, that you are not an escaped criminal, or a ticket-of-leave man, or that you may not bring a swarm of loose characters, male and female, on the place? I have to protect my brothers and sisters from that; it would be criminal if I did not. And my mother—she has suffered very much—your behaviour might have cost her her reason. Lots of people say she *has* suffered in that way."

"You would like to be in a position to prove that, perhaps, so as to bring an action to get the custody of her person and the control of her income?"

It was a shrewd thrust.

"It is my duty to satisfy myself that you are a fit person to have custody and control of them, and of my sisters. I want to know where you have been, what you have done, and what references you can give as to the truth of your statements."

"Quite right," said Mr. Desmond, genially. "He's a great boy, isn't he, Mother? Don't be an ass, Lennox. If you and I come to loggerheads, there'll be all the less for those whining little brats of yours; don't forget that. Shut your head now, and *voetsag.*"

Lennox did not know what *voetsag* was, but he did it.

Lance and Guin came in that afternoon, not asking questions, as the subject of parents was one that left them cold; but anxious for someone to come with them and investigate a huge tree-hollow reputed to be full of owls. Hero and Hubert joyfully volunteered; and the reluctant Kythe, who found her place at her mother's side occupied eternally by this man with the brutal face and pleasant voice, went with them, sore of heart but full of a lurking hope that they might meet Major Gervase.

It was May and Luttrell, however, going to enquire after Lady Katherine, who met him.

"Gran is better to-day," he said; "but she has to be kept awfully quiet. I don't think she should see even your mother. Mrs. Leigh is coming for a few moments to-morrow. How are you all?"

That was as near as he dared get to the crisis!

"Jogging along, jogging along, tural-lural," replied Luttrell, facetiously. "The children are off to catch owls with butterfly nets. I hope they will come back with all their eyes and hair. Where are you off to? Come back for a smoke."

They went for a walk first; and as they got back, were just in time to see, from the terrace, Aunt Hermione's parting with Mr. Raymond at the garden door.

Mr. Desmond met her in the grass walk as she came back, and linked his arm in hers. It was the first time he had voluntarily touched her.

Marching her up to the terrace, he said to Mrs. Desmond, his blue eyes laughing,

"Raymond won't be a lonely widower *much* longer, Honoria. There's balm in Gilead——"

Aunt Hermione coloured, laughed shamefacedly, and shook hands with Gervase.

This was his first sight of Desmond. He saw a merry, self-satisfied, self-possessed man, with a fresh voice and a bold blue-eyed stare, at peace with the world, to all appearances. As Desmond came on to the terrace, he gave a quizzical look at the stranger.

"Major Gervase, David," said Aunt Hermione; and Mr. Desmond gave him a pleasant and friendly greeting. In a few minutes they were deep in the mysteries of fishing, and telling tales of the famous trout-pool at the Manor Farm.

Mr. Desmond asked no personal questions of anyone. He had not done so since hearing about Kythe. He picked up what was said with surprising dexterity; but—though he was by no means silent—neither gave nor asked information. He avoided or evaded every topic, and every phrase, likely to lead to explanations.

He did not ask, when Gervase left—he did not stay long—whether he were married, or which of the Gervases he was. Yet, somehow, the information was supplied. Mrs. Desmond and Aunt Hermione, prompted by their own nervousness and discomfort, dotted the i's and crossed the t's for him.

"Poor Hugh's son," said Aunt Hermione. "He died so long ago—drank hard. The elder boy married old Rattler's daughter—the one with the dyed hair—and put himself outside the pale socially. Luckily, they have no sons."

Mr. Desmond listened sharply. He had a way of listening that, to an experienced observer, would have spoken volumes.

"Only a little girl," pursued Mrs. Desmond. "This young man will be the heir. Lady Katherine is devoted to him. How is Lady Katherine to-day? Did anyone go to enquire?"

"She is a little better, Mums," said May, "but must be kept very quiet. Mrs. Leigh is to see her to-morrow."

"Major Gervase must think me dreadfully unfeeling, not to have asked him," murmured Mrs. Desmond.

"Come up with me to Harry's, Hermie?" asked Mr. Desmond.

They went together; and conversation at the Harry Desmonds' was as limited and as cautious as at The Meadows. Meanwhile a fine riot of scandalous conjecture was spreading in the neighbourhood; and the servants of all the households in any way connected with the principals, and in many entirely unconnected, picked up and passed round a wonderful variety of assertions, of varying values and importance. As usual, in such matters, truth was conspicuous by its absence, but imagination supplied her place and she was never missed.

Mrs. Desmond went down the garden to the flagged walk below the roses, and paced up and down slowly, head erect, eyes wide and far-seeing, and a return of the whisperings and gesticulations, widely at variance with her previous restraint. It was as if she had held herself in and could now give way. In between

the animated, whispered monologues she saw visions—David, a fairer, slighter David, with a face empty of much that branded it now, on one knee beside her low chair, whispering in her throat, "Ready, darling? Come along," or looking at her quizzically and saying, "What deep, dark and desperate designs are you plotting now?" in adoring admiration. And David, this new David, a coarsened David, with those same words on hot lips—she would rather have known him, in truth and in certainty, dead and laid hard by Farmer Johnstone's manure heap, all those years—all those weary years—until they put him into the mossy Churchyard under the stone inscribed with his name; she would rather that, bitterly as she had revolted against it at the time, than this returning.

She knew, past all doubt, that he had lived with another woman—perhaps women. Knowing that, she did not care to know any more. Nothing else mattered. He had left her, not under the stress of any desperate misfortune or threat, not under violence or restraint, but to go with another woman. All her past was dust and ashes, all her hopes and regrets futile, all her fancies deception. The man she had loved so faithfully had never had life or being.

And she loved him still, this flesh-and-blood David, the human frame of the ideal that was shattered; the bridegroom of her youth and the father of her children. He was her lover again, and she loved him while she loathed him—loved his body while she loathed his soul. Her relations with him were odious to her, yet she could deny him nothing. It was useless to resent; the more

she dwelt on it the more she hurt herself. She was of those who endure, not of those who fight.

The past held no comfort, the future no hope. The present had to be faced and lived out. She braced herself for the dreary task, and wished that she were dead.

CHAPTER X

THE DAYS THAT CAME

WHEN "the children" came back, without any owls but with stupendous appetites, Kythe's tears were almost forgotten. They had had an uproarious afternoon, had been "chivvied" by Lord Gotto's gamekeeper, had fallen in with a gypsy, who had read their palms and given them peppermints, and had seen the first fight of the season between two stags.

"I'm to be a Star of the Footlights," announced Hero. "I shall have bouquets and diamond rings and a tahara of rubies."

"And a nice fool you'll look in it," said Hubert, with healthy contempt. "I'm to command men, and sail above their heads, and have medals enough for a garter twice round my leg."

" 'Up in a balloon, boys,' " quoted Lance. "People are awfully sea-sick, in balloons, and sailing above heads isn't all jam. Mine is the best, I'm to turn over money like grain, and whatever I touch will make money. Would anyone like to lend me a fiver and let the interest run up?"

"What was yours, Guin?"

"Twins," said Guin, promptly, "and ten more after

that, and to cross two oceans. What was yours, Kythe?"

"Can't remember," said Kythe, indistinctly.

"Oh, yes, you can. Guin's is rotten, but not as bad as yours—break hearts, wasn't it?"

"And break my own in the doing of it, and dark eyes and red hair will bring me woe," gabbled Kythe, defiantly.

"Dark eyes and red hair—that's Uncle Arthur," observed Lance, half-emptying the jam-pot at one helping, so that Hubert raised a protest. "All right; you can have what I leave."

"You don't call his hair red, do you?" scoffed Kythe, with affected disdain. In her heart was dread.

"What is it if it ain't red? Guin, if you put pieces of that size into your mouth, I'll tell Gran."

"What a yammer, in the playroom," remarked Mr. Desmond, settling down to finish the *Times*.

"The Gervase children are there, from The Domain," explained Mrs. Desmond. "They are noisy, when they all get together. Lance and Guin Gervase—our children see a lot of them, they are all so much the same age and live so close to each other."

Mr. Desmond made the mistake of taking it for granted that "the Gervase children" would be the family of the Major Gervase he had seen, who was to inherit The Domain. He saw them all together before they left, and May and Aunt Hermione noticed how his blue eyes narrowed and how keenly he watched Lance. He made no remarks about them beyond saying,

"Sure they are nice company for the youngsters? Some of the Gervases are pretty queer, Mama. We ought to be careful."

"Poor children," sighed Mrs. Desmond. "It is a dreadful slur, having a mother like theirs."

Mr. Desmond took this to mean that Major Gervase had an unsatisfactory wife too, and made no further remark except that the Gervases were unlucky in the matter of wives.

Arthur Gervase got into a habit of lurking about the lane, and Kythe into the corresponding habit of opening the door, at about half-past nine at night. The girl's heart was full of resentful sorrow. She hated her father and detested his close association with her mother, which naturally and inevitably shut her out. She missed her mother's company; and most of all she missed her mother's dependence on her.

So she turned all the more willingly to Gervase; and the secret she could not have kept from her mother, in the days when they were so much to each other, she easily kept under the new conditions.

Arthur Gervase knew the risk he was running of starting a scandal if anyone chanced to see them. He knew he had no business to encourage this child in clandestine ways. He came less to The Meadows by day, disliking equally to be the guest of a man like Mr. Desmond, and of a man whose daughter he was entrapping into a shady intrigue.

The Rector came less often. The Leighs called, but did not come again. Harry Desmond's wife seldom came. It dawned on them that they were being

avoided. And it also dawned on them that Mr. Desmond had taken his place in the household so completely and so smoothly that not only had no explanations been asked or given, but that none could ever be asked, and more—that the time during which he was away seemed blurred and far distant, and the routine of which he was a part had always been.

There was no hitch, no jarring of the household wheels. Things just went on, and he was there giving orders, yet not interfering; establishing his authority, yet not asserting it; watchful, genial, secretive and unruffled.

The subject of where he had been, occupied the family increasingly. Endless conclaves, beginning and ending in the same unsolved mystery, were held at the Rectory, at the Harry Desmonds', at the Manor Farm, and The Domain; and above all in the playroom among the young Desmonds. The inscrutable stranger who was their father gave no clue to which their conjectures could fasten.

"He has been abroad," said Hubert, on one of these early occasions, "because he said that about the 'mail.' "

"He never uses any words I can 'spot,' " complained Luttrell. "No traveller's words, no foreign ones, nothing I can get hold of."

"He has been in some tremendous row," stated Hero, sagely. "That is a fearful scar he has on his head. I can't bear to look at it."

"And he is always touching it and feeling it," added May. "It makes me feel sick when I see him."

"Must have been an awful crack," opined Luttrell. "Perhaps he got it in the South African war. He rotted you about that, Lennox. Thought you a blighter not to have been."

"Did you ask him whether *he* was there?" interposed Hubert. "Why didn't you? That would have been your opportunity."

"Well," replied Lennox, "why didn't you ask? You heard him say it as well as me."

"We are all afraid to ask him anything," said Kythe, with her direct, unchildlike scorn, as Hubert made no reply. "We never dare ask him anything."

"And if we did, he wouldn't tell," retorted Luttrell.

"Looks as if he would give you one in the eye, instead of an answer," said Hubert. "Cheerful parent, ain't he?"

"And for the last I don't-know-how-many-years," went on Kythe, with that hard scorn, "if any of us had been asked what we would most like to happen, we would have said, for Father to come home."

The dreadful truth of this struck them dumb.

"Do you remember," went on Kythe, unflinchingly, and they all looked at her in a kind of pained wonder, "when that body was found? And we all felt, now he never will come back; and how awful it seemed?"

"Shut up, Ky," called Luttrell, and Hero gave a sobbing cry. "What's the use of chewing on it?"

"Who is it says that the heaviest curse is the gratified wish?" asked May, with a sigh; and as no one supplied the requisite information, added, "Suppose we ask Papa?"

"You daren't," scoffed Hubert. And then tentatively, "I wonder if he has told Mother?"

That was what they all wondered. That was what they none of them knew. That was a secret which Mrs. Desmond guarded as resolutely and completely as her husband did the facts relating to his disappearance.

About a week after his return, Aunt Hermione's engagement to the Rector was announced, and the wedding was fixed for the New Year. The children were full of excitement about it; May, Hero, Kythe and Guin were to be bridesmaids. Arthur Gervase was to be best man.

Riding over to the Manor Farm, Arthur saw another horseman waving to him, and rode on past the turning to meet his brother Hugh. Hugh kept well out of the way of The Domain family, but had always been on good terms with his brother, and saw him from time to time. Arthur had never accepted his grandfather's root-and-branch condemnation of poor, good-natured Hugh.

"I say," Hugh began, without further formality, "have you seen this?"

"This" was a crumpled and rather elderly newspaper, an Australian one. An unobtrusive paragraph in a corner announced the death, by blood-poisoning, of Teresa Maria Santa Gervase, daughter of the late Hugh Gervase, of Mallabara, and Lower Domain, and Mrs. Stenton, his wife.

"I expected most likely you hadn't seen it," explained Hugh, "and thought you'd like to know. On account of the children, you know."

Arthur nodded, and read it again, noting the date, place, and the name and date of the paper. It was several months old.

"Poor Teresa!" he said. "On the whole, she is lucky to have died in her bed and not to have been murdered——"

"Or hanged," put in Hugh. "I can't pretend much sentiment, can you? On the whole, she was a less creditable member of the family than even my noble self, and this is a comparatively respectable end."

"Unless 'blood-poisoning' is a euphemism for drink," suggested Arthur. "I wonder where her husband is?"

"Happy release for him, I should think," commented Hugh. "That is to say, if there is such a person."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, look at it, man! It says who she is the daughter of; but no mention of her being anyone's wife——"

"I never thought of that," said Arthur, shocked.

"Well, the children being called Gervase is rather a give-away, isn't it? Gervases don't lie so thick on the ground—— I've often thought of it. Do you mean to tell me Gran hasn't?"

"She has never said anything of the sort to me."

"If there was a husband, he can claim them, by law."

"It's a bad business," said Arthur. "Poor little devils. They are nice kids, too. Thanks, old man, for telling me. Shall I ride back with you?"

Lady Katherine was still rather invalidish. She had shut herself up a good deal and seen but little of

her friends. Mrs. Desmond had been once to sit with her. The subject of Mr. Desmond's return was only touched upon, not discussed.

"I hope he is well," said Lady Katherine, courteously.

"Thank you, yes. He is very well, and looks it," answered Mrs. Desmond.

"You will be glad to have him back." And that was all. No attempt to probe, or to force confidence.

Old Mrs. Leigh was Lady Katherine's most frequent visitor; and she had an idea that Lady Katherine had something on her mind. She mentioned it to Tom (who mentioned it to Major Gervase, who thought it highly probable), but she had no notion what its nature might be. Arthur had a shrewd surmise that it concerned Teresa; but knew nothing with certainty.

He tried to rid himself of the worrying thoughts raised by the news of his sister's death, and the unpleasant idea Hugh had presented to him. If Teresa had never been married, these children were illegitimate; and that would cut Lance out of any chance of succession to The Domain. Arthur had sometimes thought that if he had no sons, there might be some way of passing things on to Lance, who would love the old place, and value it; but such a thing as this would put it out of the question.

It would be just what one might expect of Teresa; but what about Lady Katherine? Had she known? Arthur remembered, several times, to have made allusions to the unknown father of Lance and Guin, and never had the old lady given the faintest hint that she

considered the position equivocal. Unfortunate, of course; and disgraceful, in one way; but not this particular kind of disgrace.

It made Arthur hot all over. Damn Teresa—yes, even though she were dead. What a curse she had always been!

Slowly he went to his grandmother's room, and braced himself for a trying interview. She took the news very quietly, her face a little in shadow, sitting in her wide, padded chair with her feet on a stool and an Indian shawl over her knees. The fire burnt clear, and the room had a spacious comfort and dignity that made the very thought of wild-cat Teresa seem improbable and fantastic.

"Poor soul," said the old lady, at last. "May she rest in peace. What a mis-spent life!"

"Peace and Teresa hadn't much in common," observed Arthur. "It will be odd if they meet now. Gran, there are a lot of things we ought to discuss—that I want to thrash out with you. About the children"—she shifted uncomfortably in her chair, and pushed the stool away—"you insist on going through the estate business with me, because of—eventualities; and this is really much more important. I hate to think of the time when you won't be here; you have been father and mother and everything in the world to me; and I want to be able to pass on a little of it to them."

Her face was shielded by her hand, on which she leant, her elbow resting on the arm of the chair near-

est to him. He went on, not knowing what to make of her silence.

"They are only thirteen and fourteen now. Until they are twenty-one, their father has legal rights over them; and if he should turn up any day—it would be rather rough on them. You see," getting more and more nervous, "I don't really know anything about him; and anyone might pretend to be their father, armed with a copy of the marriage-certificate!"

She moved again, impatiently. Then, with a quick sigh, leant forward towards the fire.

"He is not likely to trouble us."

Her voice was husky.

"Do you know who he is?"

He asked the question sharply.

After another pause, Lady Katherine gathered herself up. Looking him full in the face, she said firmly,

"I have no reason to suppose she was ever married."

Arthur was silent. Presently she turned back to the fire.

"I think," said Arthur, after a time, "that you ought to tell me all you know. It will be my responsibility, and I ought to know where I stand."

He spoke with more determination than he had ever used to Lady Katherine before.

"I don't know anything to tell you," she responded; and there was almost a wail in her voice.

"Then," he said, with insistence, "you had better tell me what you think, and why you think it."

"She was mad, in—that way," said Lady Katherine,

hoarsely. "She could not keep her hands off any man. At least, that is the only excuse I can make for her. And she was fascinating, beyond question."

She lost herself in her musings, gazing into the fire with an expression of misery that struck Arthur into dismay.

"Who was the man?" he asked, when the silence had lasted a long time.

"I don't know. There was a man—some low man, connected with the market-gardening—that she had got hold of. She used to slip out and meet him at night. Your grandfather got to know of it and was terribly angry. That was when we made up our minds to send her back to Mrs. Hugh—to Mrs. Stenton, as she had then become—your mother."

It almost seemed as if Lady Katherine were wandering in her memory.

"I think it was too late, even then. She sent us an impertinent letter, mocking us and saying our precaution had been useless; when Lance was born she sent us a copy of the birth certificate, and there was no entry of the father's name. In the space for it she put a great question-mark——"

Arthur nearly laughed. Teresa was really impossible. Poor Gran!

"When the children arrived here," went on Lady Katherine, "there was a letter that the Chinaman brought. It had quite a large sum of money, to defray their clothing expenses and the man's wages; and a note from Teresa—just her off-hand style—asking me to forgive her and give her children a chance. 'They

are worth saving,' she said; 'not a bit like me, and they may make you some worthy return for your goodness.' That was all."

Lady Katherine repeated the words slowly and carefully. The appeal was rather touching, coming from Teresa; but Arthur could not understand, even with that and all that had preceded it, Lady Katherine receiving and bringing up as Gervases, in the old home, the illegitimate children of some unknown man or men. It was truly amazing.

No such disgrace had ever touched their name before. Gervases had been wild, but their women had been proudly virtuous. Such an one as Teresa well deserved to be cast out; what influence had been at work to earn her this sort of forgiveness? Lady Katherine, untouched by modernity in any of its forms, unmoved by arguments for the freedom of women, leniency for their errors, compassion for the unwanted baby—she had always been adamant on these points—had introduced to the County and adopted at The Domain, as Gervases, these illegitimate waifs, these children of utter shame, offspring not only of an illicit union, but of a betrayal of class as well as chastity—Teresa Gervase and a market-gardener's man!

The more he thought of it, the more inexplicable it seemed.

"Why did you have them here?" he asked, at last, more roughly than he knew. "People take them for —people think them——" he broke off.

Poor little kids! Jolly little beggars, too.

"I tried to make some atonement," said Lady Kath-

erine, falteringly, indistinctly. Then, to his horror, broke into bitter weeping—the first tears he had ever seen her shed.

Of all things for her to say, this was surely the strangest. Of all things for her to do, to weep was the most unexpected. There was a mystery he could not fathom; and meanwhile he could not press his inquisition. He rang for the maid and left them, feeling guilty and brutal and hopelessly perplexed.

The children themselves took the news philosophically, and without a particle of emotion. Gervase was a trifle concerned that they should not make even a pretence at sorrow.

"Then she won't come and take us away now," was what Guin said, and there it began and ended.

This unconcerned attitude again troubled their friends the Desmonds, to whom it seemed almost indecent. They ventured on a polite attempt at condolence, but found it waved aside as unnecessary.

"And perhaps she isn't really," confided Lance to Hubert. "Once or twice, there was people who had a death put in the papers that wasn't true. One was a friend of mother's, and she was found out because there wasn't a funeral. Someone tried to find where the funeral was, and that busted it."

This shed new and unusual lights on ordinary happenings that made Hubert and the other Desmonds exchange many queer reflections.

Lance did not air this theory to his uncle, to whom such an idea would have been startling indeed.

Meanwhile, gossip had been busy. She is a hard-

working jade and gets through more in a half-hour than honest folk get through in a year. Every imaginable fable was in circulation concerning Mr. Desmond's return, and his disgraceful absence. Disgraceful it now was, beyond any doubt. Elopement, forgery, bigamy, and acute mania, were freely canvassed. The favoured theory of one hearth was indignantly scouted on another; and people who had no earthly means of knowing anything at all about it contradicted each other's versions with heat, and gave the "real facts" with vehemence and positiveness. Details were forthcoming, and significant corroborations; and authorities were quoted whose only disqualification was that they had not laid their very emphatic statements before the public long ago.

A lady was by far and away the favourite theory. *The* lady was, beyond doubt, that heroine of an ancient and unsavoury divorce case, who had left her guilty lover in the lurch at the eleventh hour and refused to commit herself to the marriage for which she had wrecked her reputation. She had quietly removed herself from the glare of publicity, which she had so assiduously courted, and had lived in a hitherto unexplained obscurity. But it was all revealed now. She had been in the Himalayas with Mr. Desmond, practising a form of magic worship which had ended in her death and his freedom.

It was a mere trifle that the dates in no case tallied. That deterred no narrator. Everything else was so clear.

Then there was that bank failure. The man respon-

sible, the absconding director, had never been found. If he had been, there would have been revelations of the utmost piquancy, and Mr. Desmond would have been involved. He fled, fearing that the other man might make a clean breast of it if caught. He had netted thousands—thousands; literally thousands. That was how he was able to live, all those years. The other man had died, and, the fear of exposure removed, Mr. Desmond was free to come home.

The bank had not failed until eighteen months after Mr. Desmond's disappearance; but who cared for a trifle like that!

There was also "that dreadful scandal—do you remember?" when a number of men well-known in society had to make themselves scarce, to escape criminal proceedings. Mr. Desmond was one of *those*. He had the audacity to come back now, because he had no doubt heard that Lord —— had come back last year, and had not been interfered with. Did you not know? Oh, yes; I saw him in the Burlington Arcade the other day, looking just the same. You could not mistake him. And, if he comes back and no notice is taken, why not Mr. Desmond? You see, if they arrest him, he will say things about the others.

There was a great deal of this kind of thing; and there were also sly hints that Mrs. Desmond had always been "queer," and no kind of a wife for a high-spirited man like Mr. Desmond. He couldn't stand it, you know, and simply cut the painter. I really don't know whether I blame him!

Then came the death of old J. B. Marx, the South

African millionaire, who died in his luxurious home at Batten, alone and unloved and helpless with arthritis. A quarter of a column, in big print, in the morning papers, told of his death, his life, his ill-health, and his wealth. A brief paragraph beneath, in small type, recalled the bereavement he had sustained in the loss of his only son, who was employed in his father's business. When in possession of a very large sum of money, this young man had disappeared; and as he was not remarkable for sobriety—or, as the paper euphemistically put it, was of a sporting disposition—it was presumed that he was decoyed, robbed and made away with. His destination that afternoon, after drawing the money, had been, so far as could be determined, a place on the line a little beyond Fairlands.

Some spark, flashing from the acute brain of one of these searchers after truth, set light to a train that connected up these odd fragments of reminiscence with the mystery of Mr. Desmond's disappearance and the body that was exhumed near Farmer Johnstone's manure heaps. Regardless of grammar no less than logic, they cried, "that's him." And from thenceforth the new tale took the limelight, shouldering its blatant way through the other theories and taking up a prominent position in the foreground. Being the most lurid of all, it was naturally the most popular. Bigamy was all very well; and forgery was exciting in its way; and elopements are always fascinating. But these do not entail the desperate consequences of murder. And of murder, cold-blooded, calculating murder, Mr. Des-

mond was forthwith judged guilty. The money of which he robbed his murdered victim was, of course, to pay gambling debts; although some people preferred to have it hush-money.

Christmas might have been a difficult time for Mr. Desmond had the usual festivities been on hand. The season, however, was overshadowed for the family by the sudden death of Mrs. Harry Desmond, from influenza. Harry Desmond was utterly broken down, his son and daughters abroad, his wife's people engaged with another serious illness. Mr. Desmond, as of old, with great capability and that enjoyment of a job not his own which had always characterised him, took complete charge; and his feeling and tact were a great comfort to poor, stricken Harry, who felt his resentment melting away with each fresh manifestation of his brother's sympathy and helpfulness.

Mr. Desmond wrote to his nephew and nieces full accounts, and took all the necessary mournful correspondence off his afflicted brother's hands. Some of his correspondents did not even know of his return, and their stupefaction on reading the signature was indescribable. The letters were so matter-of-fact and so taking everything for granted that the recipients did not doubt all had been satisfactorily explained to the Desmond family; although their own curiosity remained unallayed.

The household, thus plunged into mourning, kept itself rather to itself and did not notice the steady withdrawal of acquaintance. Harry Desmond was persuaded to stay at The Meadows until after the

New Year, when he was to go to his daughter in St. Petersburg, she being at the moment engaged in having a new baby.

Fairlands, which had thought well of Mr. Harry Desmond and made him free of its cliques and its amenities, deeply resented this lapse on his part. It was unpardonable that he should go to stay with those people. No sooner poor Mrs. Desmond dead than off he rushes to that disreputable brother! It is enough to make the poor woman turn in her grave.

Virtuously, Fairlands took up the case against Mr. Desmond, and the murder theory was adopted unanimously. They were not sure that Mrs. Desmond too had not been privy to it, which was why she had always been so "queer." Of course she must have known something; probably helped him to get away!

Lord Gotto of Gozo was very hot about it. He could not think what The Law was for. What were the police thinking of? Why was not a warrant taken out? With his disreputable red face and his bawling voice, he read the Riot Act violently to Mr. Talbot, who was a Justice and who, most unexpectedly, did know a little law himself. Justices all too frequently do not.

"A warrant cannot be signed unless there is some evidence sworn to support an accusation, or a suspicion," objected Mr. Talbot. "You can't simply connect a man and a murder and have him arrested, unless you can show that there is evidence to support the charge."

"His disappearance," bawled Lord Gotto, "and his

being able to live all those years without touching his income——"

"Can you prove he ever was anywhere where he could have seen or known young Marx and his errand that day? Can you prove that body was young Marx's body? Come now, Lord Gotto. If you were a Justice, would you shell out warrants on vague gossip like that? Heaven help the public if we did!"

Lord Gotto was in no way appeased. He denounced Mr. Talbot's "kid-glove" methods, and continued to call for Mr. Desmond's head on a charger.

Aunt Hermione's wedding was not postponed, but was cut down to the quietest possible affair. It took place from The Meadows, and Mr. Desmond again earned golden opinions. His sister was generously, nay, lavishly provided for, and David made the most fatherly brother possible. The Rector's heart warmed once more towards his old friend; and Major Gervase, who came to support the bridegroom, was obliged to own that Desmond was an uncommonly pleasant chap.

Harry Desmond left for Russia, and promised to stay at The Domain on his return. Mr. Raymond and Aunt Hermione went to Sicily for their honeymoon; things at Lower Domain went on as usual. Every day as it went by made Mr. Desmond's disappearance more of a fantasia; yet every day increased his family's subtle distrust of him, and the feeling of shame that bowed down their young heads.

And before Easter-tide another staggering surprise was sprung upon them, that seemed worse than anything that had yet been.

CHAPTER XI

THE MUTTERINGS OF THE STORM

FEBRUARY was muggy and breathless, and Mrs. Desmond's robust and unchanging health seemed to suffer. Heavy-eyed and languid, with dull skin and bad nights, she was palpably suffering and made them all feel anxious. Dr. Willett was called in.

The verdict was startling.

"Unusual, at her age," he said to Mr. Desmond, "but not at all unnatural, under the circumstances. It is very risky. You ought to have been more careful."

Dr. Willett was angry, and spoke abruptly. The man had got ahead of the physician for the moment.

Mr. Desmond looked stricken.

"She has always been wonderfully strong and healthy," he said, beseechingly.

"She will want it all," retorted Dr. Willett, curtly.

Gervase, hurrying down the lane that night on his way home from the Manor Farm, heard the click of the garden door with a smile of pleasant anticipation. Kythe was waiting for him; but it was a Kythe so silent, so absent, and evasive, as to make him ask what was the matter.

After a few moments she admitted something was the matter.

Then she held away from him and he found she was crying.

It was a passionate, strangling outburst, of which he could not guess the cause. It was "Mother," again; and "I hate him; oh, I hate him. I wish he *had* been dead and never come home."

But she would not tell him what the trouble was; and he kissed and comforted her and sent her in, thinking her to be the victim of wounded vanity and girlish sensitiveness.

Next day he knew.

Lance and Guin came in to say that Mr. Raymond was in the hall, enquiring for Gran; and Gervase went out to speak to him. Lady Katherine was not so well, and Mr. Raymond expressed his regret.

"She has never really pulled up," said Gervase. "It is sad to see her now, so completely and so suddenly an invalid, and so listless in mind as well as body. She does not seem to care for anything much. How is Mrs. Raymond?"

"Very well," answered the Rector, "so far as her health is concerned, but dreadfully worried about Mrs. Desmond. I don't suppose you have heard?"

"I have heard nothing," answered Gervase, looking grave.

"There is another child on the way," said the Rector, bluntly. "They are all most anxious about her."

"It is a ghastly business, altogether," he asserted, as he took his leave. "I never felt so inclined to murder

a fellow-creature—and my own intimate friend, too."

Arthur Gervase nodded.

"A bad business," he murmured. "A bad business. Poor Mrs. Desmond."

He was genuinely shocked. It seemed horrible—an outrage—he felt, like Lance, that he hated Mr. Desmond.

So that was what Kythe was crying about and would not tell him! No wonder.

Those days were bad days for the young Desmonds. On top of the almost horror and fury with which they envisaged the new state of things, their father's behaviour was the last straw. With that strange coarseness that overlaid his breeding, he fondled his wife in public, fussed over her ostentatiously, and called general attention to her condition. He discussed matters that made them tingle with shame, and went into details that had never before reached their ears. The red spots sprang ever afresh to Mrs. Desmond's cheeks, and the family hated being in the same room with their father and mother together.

"I can't think how mother stands it," cried May to Aunt Hermione. "It is simply dreadful. And it is getting to this, that he is estranging us all from mother. Even Kythe won't stay in the room, when he begins. Was he always like that, Aunt Hermie?"

"No," said Aunt Hermione, with emphasis. "Of course he was not. He was like the rest of us. You could not imagine his saying or doing an indelicate thing——"

"And now look at him!" continued May, despairingly.

The gossip and scandal, circulating round Mr. Desmond, could not fail in the long run to reach the children. Lennox made a point of acquainting himself with all that was said or surmised, and passed most of it on to Luttrell, who took it lightly enough and told some of it to May. Lance and Guin, precocious and acute, and on those peculiar, intimate terms with a number of their social inferiors which always results in large accumulations of undesirable information, garnered up enough to have made even the Raymonds open their eyes. Aunt Hermione heard more than she cared about in the parish, and spent a good deal of time in wondering how much the children knew and what they thought.

Mr. Raymond came in to lunch one day with a troubled face.

"That poor fellow Johnstone," he began, as he unfolded his table-napkin, "it really almost seems as if his troubles were being too much for him. I don't think his mind is quite clear——"

"What is it all about?" asked his wife, as the explanation of the above tarried.

"Oh! Poor Johnstone, you mean? Yes. He is going on so about that body that was found. Says that as Desmond has turned up and it can't be him, it is someone Desmond killed. Declares that if Farmer Johnstone could be persuaded to have the place turned up, they would find his son's body too. Pitiful, isn't it?"

"Good gracious, Charlie! Is this true?"

"Farmer Johnstone threatens to have him 'put away' in an asylum if he goes on like that. Poor fellow."

"I often wonder whose body that was," mused Aunt Hermione. "It really is a mystery, now David has come back."

"Johnstone has it all pat," answered the Rector. "It is the body of the man his son got into mischief with; and he has some wild story besides of the lady at The Domain. He says he knew she was in it somehow."

"Lady Katherine!" exclaimed his wife. "What cheek!"

"He is not responsible, poor creature," commented the Rector. "Brooding on his troubles has upset his balance."

"There are enough stories about David already," sighed Aunt Hermione, "without Johnstone adding to them. What was David supposed to have gained, by murdering these two young men? I suppose that is the idea, isn't it?"

The Rector nodded.

"*I* don't know," he said, lightly. "It is a mad yarn, anyhow. Don't let us worry ourselves any more about it."

Johnstone, however, was not disposed to allow himself to be so summarily cleared away. He hung about in his spare time, looking for someone with whom to ventilate his grievance. Not a frequenter of The Blue-Nosed Man, he preferred Tenterley's, or a chance listener in the streets. Luttrell, Lennox, and Gervase,

besides the Rector and Mr. Turton, were made the recipients of his rambling confidence. There was little point in the story. What he wanted "cleared up" was, the identity of the body. He "named no names," but wanted it "cleared up." There were "them as were responsible" who ought to be made to speak.

Lennox was in a mighty fume. Demanding hotly of the Rector and of Gervase that "something should be done to stop it," he could not suggest what it was that should be done, nor what it was that should be stopped. Johnstone "named no names," and his story and his suggestions remained wrapt in mystery. Only, it was clearly understood, whatever of suspicion there was of whatever crime had been committed, clung round Mr. Desmond.

It was useless to fume and fuss. No one was prepared to go the length of shutting poor old Johnstone up as insane, and short of that one could not stop him. His brother the farmer gave him what he described as a proper raking; but without effect.

Gervase and Tom Leigh had several long discussions over the situation. There was, no doubt, much that wanted elucidation. The disappearance of rascally young Johnstone, in itself, was not in any way mysterious. It was all in accordance with known facts. He worked with his father, had robbed his uncle, had been told to make himself scarce or he would be sent to prison; and had gone off without keeping his promise to his father to say good-bye to him. All that was only what one expected from the young scamp, who drank and gambled from the time he left school.

Never having shown much consideration for his father's feelings, it surprised no one, and did not seem to call for explanation, that he did not keep his promise to come, and had never written. Farmer Johnstone gave him his steerage passage and a five-pound note, and told him to go to Hell out of England. He had gone.

There was nothing mysterious about all this. Not like Mr. Desmond's disappearance. What was mysterious was the finding of a body near Farmer Johnstone's manure heaps, that was not the body of Mr. Desmond. A crime had manifestly been committed; and while some were prepared to suspect Mr. Desmond, others shook their heads and said that there were most likely more reasons than were apparent for young Johnstone's cruel behaviour to his father. If *he* had any hand in it——! The rest was left significantly unsaid.

Coming to poor Amos Johnstone's ears, this interpretation of the affair nearly sent him crazy in good earnest.

Arthur Gervase was now in a fair way to be in love with the immature but beautiful Kythe Desmond. Some men are violently attracted by youth and immaturity; and although he was rather ashamed of himself, he felt that her all too evident girlish fancy for him was flattering and attractive. She plainly thought him wonderful and fascinating, and her eloquent and most lovely eyes sent thrills through him when he met their shy but worshipping gaze. She had a way of looking to him for comfort in her deepest moods of depression that had established a sort of secret be-

tween them; and he saw her, at the garden door in the lane, at night, more often than he cared to remember.

An utter and complete cad, he would be called, he knew, by men. If Desmond knew—he grew hot, at the thought of Desmond having the right to lecture him or pull him up.

And yet he could not keep from making the lane his way home, and stopping to kiss and comfort the pretty girl shyly waiting there. She was self-possessed enough, and could bandy words with anyone, on most occasions; but shy with him.

She was only fifteen. Old for her age, true; accustomed to the society of grown-up people, shrewd, clear-witted to the point of uncanniness, and sensitive as few children are to the motives and griefs of older people. Her life with the other children was only a pretence life. She was dearly loved by them, but was not of them. Her real life, her real self, as Hero complained, was something inside, something you could not get at.

It was beyond question—and Gervase had enough insight to see and understand this—that a love affair with him, however school-girlish and fleeting, would not be an easy or a desirable thing for her. She would cherish it passionately and romantically, even if absurdly; and it would leave its mark in spite of her youth.

Well; he wanted to settle down. He wanted Lady Katherine to see his wife—and perhaps his children—before she passed to the bourne whence none return.

Would she welcome this bride, such a bride? Daughter of that man—bearing his name . . . Could Gran welcome that? And less than half his age—a mere child?

He wondered how long it would be before she would be considered marriageable. The doubt shed on his nephew's birth made him think seriously of marriage now. It meant the succession to The Domain; and though the lands left them were no longer wide, they were old and very, very dear. The Domain and the Homestead, and the Manor Farm, a beautiful, compact stretch of country, had never been held by any save a Gervase from that time remote when the Conqueror parcelled out his fair prize among his hard-fighting barons. Arthur Gervase wanted to keep it for the Gervases, and not let it go to strangers.

The estate had been disentailed and had been disposed of since then by will, or by the inheritance of the eldest son. His grandfather had got it on the death intestate of a childless uncle, and had left it to his widow for her life, and then to Arthur. Hugh had been cut out altogether.

Gervase wondered whether he could bear to be Desmond's son-in-law; and tried to shake off his doubts and dreams by going off for a day's fishing with Tom Leigh. He knew that Leigh hoped he would marry his niece, but she was too racketty for Arthur. His taste in women was for something more restful.

On his way home that night he found Kythe wandering in the lane.

"This is very imprudent," he scolded. "Aren't you supposed to be in bed? Suppose some drunken brute came along——?"

"Suppose I saw a dragon or a sea-serpent!" scoffed Kythe. "Why should a drunken brute come along; and why shouldn't I hear him coming and get to the door first?"

He laughed.

"What brought you out?" he asked.

"To see if you would come," she answered, with soft insinuation. "I wanted to see you."

"Yes? What for?"

His hand was on her arm, his head bending to hers.

"Only to see you," she whispered. "Something nice to think of before I go to bed. Things are so horrible——"

She broke off.

"How is your mother?"

She did not answer for a moment. Then broke out,

"O, I wish I could go away—get away from it all —from *him,* from Mother, from everyone. Isn't there anyone who would take me away? I wish Uncle Harry would. He's got no one, and I could look after him. Don't you think that would be a good thing, Major Gervase? I do want to get away. I can't bear it."

"And what should I do?" asked Gervase, low. "No little sweetheart to say good-night to me in the lane? Wouldn't you mind, never seeing me again? Wouldn't you mind? Kythe, little Kythe?"

What a blackguard you are, something inside him

kept saying; and something else also said, You have done it now, and you must stick to it.

He felt almost a horror at himself; yet beyond doubt she was sweet and seductive in spite of her childishness; and beyond doubt also she knew and understood the situation.

"It is our secret, little Kythe, our very own," he found himself saying, his face pressed to the soft, springy hair. "For nobody else but us. Keep it with me, won't you? And, stay; don't go off and leave me. Stay until we can tell people."

Her kisses were warm enough, in all conscience, though she was girlishly shy and full of little reticences and reserves and refusals. He let her go reluctantly; she was very sweet and soft in her shyness.

As he left the garden door behind him, a man came to meet him. How much of the interview he had seen or overheard, Gervase did not know, but hot anger at his own folly and imprudence and this man's intrusion, seized him.

The man accosted him, however, most respectfully.

"Might I have a word with you, Master Arthur, sir, arxking your pardon for stopping of you?"

It was Johnstone.

Slightly mollified, Gervase let the old man walk beside him, and pour out his tale. Briefly, it came to this, that as the lady had come back, couldn't Major Gervase do something for him? The lady would know, and p'raps she would tell him something. *She* knew, for certain sure.

"Master Arthur, sir, arxk her to tell me. A pore

ole man, I am, and I've a-waited all these years and never told a sowl what I could a-told. Held my tongue, I have, out of respec' for the fam'ly and never let no word slip. But I want to know, I do, afore I go to my rest. It's not so fur off now, Master Arthur, and I couldn't rest easy unless I knowd what it wuz as become of my lad. I'm a pore ole man, I am, with nothing but my rest to look forrard to. It ooldn't be fair, Master Arthur, for to spile my rest for me. And people saying bitter black things about him; I got to clear him afore I goes."

This passionate and bewildering harangue had no meaning for Gervase.

"I'm awfully sorry, Johnstone, but I don't know what you are talking of. What lady has come that can tell you about your lad? I don't know of any."

"Miss Teresa, sir. I see her come, this very night as ever is. Drove up in a motor, she did; and she's there now. You will find her, sir, when you get in."

No news Johnstone could have given would have been less welcome; and Gervase did not believe it. He thought the old man's mind was indeed astray; yet the very idea of Teresa's arrival, or possible arrival, sent him hurrying to the relief of Lady Katherine. He let himself in by the side door, hardly heeding Johnstone's piteous wail "you'll arxk her to tell me, Master Arthur, sir, you will, won't you?" and raced up to the house.

"Mrs. Gervase, sir," remarked Mellish, as Gervase

wondered how to frame an inquiry; "she arrived at a quarter to eight. You will find her in the lib'ry, sir; she wouldn't have the drawing-room set out."

"How is Lady Katherine?" Gervase asked, in utter, breathless dismay.

"As well as could be expected, sir," answered Mellish, discreetly. "She did not have a c'lapse, nor yet a crissis, sir."

"I had better see her, if she is still awake," remarked Gervase and went upstairs without delay.

Lady Katherine was in bed, but wakeful. Her expression, resigned and beaten, made his heart ache.

"Have you seen her?" she asked.

"Not yet," replied Arthur. "Did she say what had brought her?"

"Her children," said Lady Katherine, with an intonation of indescribable scorn. Then, in a wail almost as piteous as old Johnstone's, she cried,

"O, Arthur, she has come to make trouble. Dreadful, dreadful trouble. I cannot bear the thought. I wish she had been dead in good earnest, whether it is wicked or not. Why did she, oh; why did she?"

"Do you know why she came, then?" he asked, stupefied.

"I suppose so. Crazy; crazy. Wickedly, perversely crazy; or crazily wicked. I do not know which."

She turned her head restlessly on the pillow, murmuring,

"Thank God your grandfather did not live to see this."

There was a mystery and a trouble beyond his comprehension; and he kissed her and left her, in deep concern.

CHAPTER XII

FAMILY AMENITIES

WITH the greatest possible distaste, Gervase went in search of his sister. She was in possession of the library, a stately and beautiful apartment used on ordinary occasions as a sitting-room. Sprawling full length on the sofa, which she had pulled, regardless of the arrangement of the room, to the front of a fire that she had piled up to scorching point, one leg dangling over the arm, a little Spanish cigar between her lips, and an indescribable litter of smoking material, comic papers, and odds and ends around her, she looked over one shoulder and watched him without moving, as he came into the room and closed the door.

"Here you are at last," she said, in her purring contralto, reaching a careless hand to him over the back of the sofa. "Aren't you glad to see me? What an unwelcoming, and unbecoming frown?"

She laughed low, and settled herself more snugly into the sofa. It gave her pleasant sensations to see how disturbing her advent was to them all.

And, as when a boy, Arthur quailed before her resolute malice.

"Have you seen the children?" he asked, dropping her uncordial hand after the briefest pressure.

"Oh, yes. The devoted parent is my rôle, at present. I went up to see them at once; and very well they look, though I do not think you have trained them nicely in manners. They did not even pretend to be glad to see me."

"You won't find anyone here pretending that," rose to Arthur's lips, but he refrained from speech. No matter what one said, it only supplied Teresa with food for her sneers and barbs for her arrows.

She asked him a few questions, suggesting malicious answers to them, and commented on Lady Katherine being so far from robust in health.

"It was time I came home," she yawned, "to take the worry of the children off her shoulders."

Arthur was discreetly silent.

Teresa helped herself, when the Tantalus and glasses came, to a much larger tot of whiskey than her brother allowed himself, with less water. It was tossed off as if it were milk, and followed by another, without any apparent effect.

She looked her age, and at times wore an expression that was almost haggard. Worn to the bone, lined, and as thin as a woman well could be, she was yet graceful and still attractive in a feline way. Her magnificent eyes and wide laughing mouth with the pretty teeth and the obvious dimples, would carry her on to the end.

"What about Hughie?" she asked, presently.

"Hugh did badly for himself," said Arthur absently. "Poor old Hugh."

"I must go over and see him," she said, with her wicked, enraging laugh.

It would be just like her, thought Arthur, to take up with the Rattler crowd—painted, loud-voiced women who did not mind loose jests, and rowdy, hard-drinking men totally untroubled by breeding—just the kind of society for Teresa. The Rattlers were not immoral in the accepted sense, only low-lived, and fishy in money matters. She was capable of inviting them to The Domain!

"Well, I think I'll go to bed," said Arthur. "Where have they put you?"

"In the Grey Passage," answered Teresa, with a wicked grin. "Too far from the children, I'm afraid. I shall have to get moved to-morrow; I want to keep a close eye on them."

Arthur slammed the door in the temper he could never control when Teresa was about.

When he came out of the bath-room, he found his room in possession of two flannel-clad and dressing-gowned young people, waiting, perched on the end rail of the bed.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Waiting for you," answered Guin. "We wanted to see you before you went to bed."

Something in the child's words and manner stirred a queer memory in Gervase's brain. Where had he heard her say that before? No; of course, it was not her. It was something like what Kythe had said to him, only a short time ago. It was like the way Kythe

had said it, too; and there was a troubled expression, altogether new to Guin's face, that was reminiscent of Kythe.

He puzzled over it for a few moments, giving it more attention than its importance seemed to warrant.

He sat on the bed beside the rail, and Guin squatted close to him, hugging his arm. Lance, astride of the thick wooden rail, opened fire.

"Have you seen Mother?"

"Yes, old man. Just for a few minutes."

"What has she come for, Uncle Arthur? Has she come to take us?"

"Take you, dear old man? Take you where?"

"Take us—with her. Away," hoarsely.

"I won't go; I won't go," exclaimed Guin, passionately, her face smothered against his shoulder. "I won't, I won't. I'll wish she had been really dead, if she is going to take us back."

The vibrating passion of it, the unrestrained, almost despairing resentment, again recalled Kythe. Gervase felt his brain in a whirl. He did not know much about girls of that age, and had not dreamt of these tragic intensities to their natures.

"Of course she won't take you away. Why should she?" he soothed.

"Because she'll know we'd hate it," answered Lance, gloomily. "That's reason enough, for her."

The concentrated bitterness of their tone, in alluding to their mother, made a very painful impression on Gervase. He knew Lance was right. It would be

reason enough, for Teresa, if she took it into her head; and she would never count the cost, nor consider the consequences.

"Don't you worry about that," he advised. "I expect your mother has come because she is sick of wandering about, and wants to be comfortable and settled. If she had wanted you, she would have had you sent; she would hardly have come herself."

He talked to reassure them, but did not convince himself.

"Is the door properly shut?" asked Guin, with real and dreadful anxiety, lamentable to behold. "Cos she listens; and if she knew we minded——"

Lance slipped down softly and tried the door.

Gervase was desperately shocked. These children had never before shown any trace of their association with evil-doers; and he had often wondered that they had come so clean out of Teresa's hands and haunts. Evidently there were things undreamed of in their lives, things they had sloughed and left behind them with the happy adaptability of childhood—ugly things that the sight of their mother revived.

"She listens." How horrible to hear that child say it, with full knowledge of its infamy, of her own mother! Gervase felt hot anger rising against his sister; yet knew he would never have the courage to challenge her and tell her of her degradation.

He recollected the extremely calm way in which the children had received the news of their mother's announced death. At the time Gervase had had an uncomfortable impression that they were more relieved

than distressed; and Teresa's return left him in no doubt of their complete absence of filial sentiment. It was, perhaps, he consoled himself, better that way than that they should be under her unwholesome influence.

He tucked the two uneasy young people into their beds, in the two small rooms where he and Hugh had slept; and went to his own bed, full of foreboding. Falling asleep with his mind on the peculiar likeness to Kythe displayed by Guin under the influence of emotion, he dreamed that he clasped Kythe in his arms on their marriage and found her to be Guin.

Next day was Sunday. Gervase nearly always put in an appearance at Church—to encourage old Raymond, he used to say, and keep him up to the mark. Lady Katherine was no longer able to sit out the service, and only came for the Sacrament.

In the hall, waiting for the children to be ready, Gervase looked up at a sound on the big stair. It was Teresa, also palpably ready for church.

He said no word. Lance and he walked in front, Teresa and Guin a few paces behind. Teresa carried an ostentatious prayer-book, and a larger hymn-book with tunes. The family seats were at the top of the chancel, facing north and protected by jutting carved wings of woodwork. Short pews cut them off from the aisle. They had their own entry.

Gervase walked in, holding the door of the carven enclosure open for his sister, with a sound like rushing wind in his ears. He knew the sensation their entrance would create, and wished he were at the North Pole.

Across the aisle, lower down the church, sat the Desmonds. The Domain enclosure was in full view from where they sat. Kythe and Guin exchanged a greeting that they fondly imagined to be hidden from others. It expressed surprise on the one hand, and dismay on the other.

There was, of course, the greatest excitement. The village wondered what had brought "that flighty madam" back again, and how Lady Katherine took it. The Raymonds, the Leighs, and the Desmonds saw the distressing side, and felt deepest sympathy for Lady Katherine, Arthur and "those unfortunate children." No one had any thought of sinister secrets or mysteries.

Down at the bottom of the church, in one of the short pews beyond the north aisle, sat old Johnstone. Bowed, grizzled, and withered, he had not lost the keen faculties of sight and hearing; and was besides, watching for the family from The Domain. To him alone did the situation seem sinister; and the sight of Teresa worked him up to danger pitch.

He would give Master Arthur time, he kept saying to himself, with a glitter of fanaticism in his old eyes. He would give him time. "I've bided so long, I can bide a bit longer yet." But if nothing came from Master Arthur in reasonable time, then he would see to things himself. Lady Katherine had always been a lady to see things done straight. To Lady Katherine he would go, if Master Arthur failed him.

With swift and dexterous purpose, Teresa got herself out of the church before the neighbours had time

to disperse. Gervase found her, bowing with malicious recognition to the Leighs, and prepared to make everyone feel uncomfortable by being forced either to greet her or snub her publicly. He himself was greeted warmly by the Desmonds and by Mrs. Raymond. His sister so manœuvred her movements as to make an introduction unavoidable.

Mrs. Desmond smiled kindly and held out a not unfriendly hand. This was the girl who had asked Lady Katherine to forgive her and to give her children a chance. Now that she had come back to the safe haven she had despised in her stormy youth, the older woman resolved to say no word and to do no deed that would make the path of peace and order hard for those unruly feet.

So she smiled and shook hands, and held the hand an extra moment while she asked Major Gervase how Lady Katherine was.

Teresa flashed a quick, malicious glance over them from her mocking eyes. She knew as well as they did what they were all thinking.

"How do you do, Mr. Desmond? You *are* Mr. Desmond, aren't you?"

Mr. Desmond had stepped back when his wife shook hands with this woman, as if not liking to see the contact. Gervase noticed that, and felt furious. But he did not catch the surprised look on Mrs. Desmond's face at Teresa's cool greeting of her husband.

Gervase thought it "jolly bad taste," all the same. Desmond might have made himself notorious, but it

was "a bit thick" to rub it in like that, and before his wife, too.

Mr. Desmond responded, not stiffly, yet with little *empressement;* and busied himself with getting his wife home, his show of concern for her health setting everyone's teeth on edge. Teresa walked behind them with her children, Gervase going down the road through the village with Tom Leigh part of the way to the Manor Farm. He found a boy to whom he entrusted a scribbled message for Hugh.

Teresa did not go, as was usual, to the front entrance of The Domain. She turned aside and followed the Desmonds up the lane, and opened the small door in the wall with a key she produced from somewhere. An expression, purely wicked, lit her face as she turned it, from practised habit, with the peculiar twist the lock required. Lance noticed it and wondered what it meant. He and Guin passed in, their mother standing purposefully outside the threshold, watching the party from The Meadows up the lane.

When The Meadows garden door was reached, Mr. Desmond gave a sharp and furtive look back, and saw her watching.

That afternoon Teresa began her old ways.

"I am going over to see Hugh," she announced, after lunch. "Children, get ready to start at three. We will go and dig Uncle Hugh out, and make him give an account of himself."

"We don't go to Uncle Hugh's," objected Lance. "Gran doesn't like it."

"Gran won't mind your going anywhere, with your mother to look after you," grinned Teresa.

When they had left the room, Gervase protested.

"If you can't keep out of bad company yourself," he said, working himself up so as to keep hold of his courage, "you might at least leave the kids out of it. It will be shameful if you mix them up with that low-lived Rattler lot."

"Compared with their own mother, dear Arthur, the Rattler lot are harmless," said Teresa, suavely.

"You needn't go out of your way to make bad worse," argued Arthur, ineffectively.

"Well, if I am not to go to Hugh's because they are too disreputable, shall we go to the Leighs'? Or to the Desmonds'?"

She eyed him tormentingly.

"No? Too respectable? A poor look-out for me, isn't it? One brother's friends too bad, and the other's too good—what am I to do for company? Any suggestions? Should I confine myself to associating solely with the servants?"

"If you come unexpectedly, without finding out if you are wanted——" he began.

"How can I find out if I am wanted at the Rattlers', unless I go there? For all you know, they may want me passionately, when they see me! Come, Arthur, I'm here; and I'm going to stay. You can't turn me out without a scandal—a loud scandal. I'll take care it's a loud one. So you had better make the best of me, and find me some amusing company."

"Why was your death announced in the *Sydney Weekly?*" asked Arthur.

"Ah! Why? Do you mean to say you haven't tumbled?" She laughed unreservedly, her mouth wide, her eyes dancing. "A very good reason, and quite successful. What a dreadful lot of Aunt Jemimas you are here! I feel as if I had got into one of Mrs. Trimmer's moral stories for young people."

"No story would be moral with you in it!"

"No. But it might be amusing, or exciting. Oh, I can see I am going to have very good fun here. Is that Mrs. Desmond going to have a baby?"

Gervase thought this coarse and offensive. Mrs. Desmond and Aunt Hermione and Mrs. Leigh and Lady Katherine never talked like that. He hated women to bring those sorts of things to men's notice.

"I haven't asked," he said, curtly.

"Haven't you used your eyes either? She looks like it. Disgusting, at her age. She ought to have finished with that sort of thing. How long has he been back? They didn't lose much time, did they?"

Gervase made no comment. He was inexpressibly annoyed.

"She can't have much spirit, or decency, to take him back like that after the way he treated her," sneered Teresa. But still he took no notice. The vulgar, vixenish outlook, which was all that could be expected of Teresa, offended him beyond speech in connection with Mrs. Desmond.

Finding he would not discuss the Desmonds, she harked back to her starting point.

"Well? Where is it to be? The Rattlers, or the Manor Farm?"

"Oh, please yourself," he retorted, and left the room.

Teresa laughed her vicious, musical laugh, and went into the garden.

She had lost no time, since her return. The porter at Fairlands station, the driver of the hired car, the under-housemaid who attended to her room, one of the garden boys, her own children—she had pumped them and elicited scraps of local information, and heard one or two of the things she wanted to know. Out in the garden, she got hold of old Adams.

"Your sons working here still, Adams?" she asked.

"Yes, Missie," said the old man. "And my grandson."

"My grandmother is fortunate," she laughed. "And which of you have the keys of the Old Tower?"

"I have, Missie. Would you like to go in, any time? It's a long time since anyone used it, not since Master Hugh left. A long time, a long time."

"Is there anything to see if I do go in?" she asked, lightly; for indeed there was nothing, except a winding stair down into a fairly dry cellar, and another up—only five or six steps up—to a room with a window looking on the garden and the place where another, looking on the lane, had been walled up. This room Hugh had used for a carpenter's shop, with a bench and a turning lathe. It was still just as he had left it. In the cellar, Adams stowed wood and coal for the greenhouses, and grew mushrooms.

Leaving the old man, she strolled to the Tower and

opened the door beside it into the lane. Walking up it with cat-like tread, she listened and listened, outside the garden wall of The Meadows, to the voices and laughter she heard within it. Mr. Desmond was in great form, and Mrs. Lennox was "playing up."

A smile, altogether evil, sat on Teresa's face as she listened. Then she made up her mind.

Calling to Lance and Guin, she collected them in The Domain garden, and suggested a walk.

"Take me for a walk somewhere. Where? Oh, anywhere. Anywhere you usually go."

And they went up the lane together.

Lance's call brought Hero and Kythe to the garden door for a few moments. Teresa spoke to them pleasantly; and Hero, conscious of no difficulties, called back into the garden,

"It is Lance and Guin and their mother."

Something made them hesitate, look round at Mrs. Gervase, and look back over their shoulders. Then Kythe, in her self-possessed way, said,

"Are you off for a walk? We must go now, Mother wants us. Good-bye."

The door closed. Teresa was perfectly certain some sign had been made forbidding the girls to ask her in. She hummed a little bravoura run and trill, to herself, during the walk, and answered the children so absently that they left off trying to be polite to her, and sheered off by themselves, talking in low tones. Presently they found she was walking so quickly as to be difficult to keep up with.

They skirted The Domain in a wide circuit and

came back into the Manor Farm Road that ran out of the village past the front entrance to The Domain, by taking a narrow path through the wood that had got to be a right of way. At the great gate of The Domain, was Gervase, obviously in an altercation with a shabby old man.

"I wun't let you put me off with that, Master Arthur. It's not natural I shouldn't want fur to know. I got to find out about my boy, and clear him of the things they are saying of him. If you wuz to arxk the young lady, now. If you wuz only to arxk her. She'd not let an old man go to his grave without knowing a thing like that; and if I don't get it from you or her, I warns you fair, Master Arthur, I'll go to Lady Katherine, I will. I'll go to her ladyship, as won't see me wronged no longer, not if she knows about it, she won't."

At the end of his vehement speech he found himself in the presence of "the young lady."

"What's the excitement, Arthur?" she asked, with mischievous curiosity. "What is old Whatsis-name going to Gran about?"

"Johnstone's my name," said the old man, loudly, but quaveringly. "Johnstone. Father of Willie Johnstone, what was a friend of your gentleman friend's."

If ever Teresa looked daunted, it was then.

"And I was saying to Master Arthur here," went on old Johnstone, "that I wants to know about my boy. I wants to know what you done with him, that was going to do so much to help him, after all the

trouble. What you done with my Willie. I got a right to know, and a right to go easy to my grave and to get my rest without being kept out of knowing what I got a right to know——"

He broke off, wandering a little.

"Is this a joker, or a lunatic?" asked Teresa, of her brother, with careless insolence.

She did it well, but Arthur saw she was disturbed. Lance and Guin were furious at her insolent tone to old Johnstone, whom they regarded with favour as one well thought of by Tenterley and by Brookes. Johnstone, who was always respectful to the gentry, but had never been required to take that kind of insolence, broke out afresh.

"Ah! You'd like fine and well to have it made out a lunacy. You'd like the old man who knew something of your goings-on to be a lunatic. You'd like to muzzle him in a 'sylum, you would, and get him out of the way."

Gervase interrupted, peremptorily.

"We can't have this sort of thing in the streets, Johnstone. If you have anything definite to say—something real and practical—come to the house tomorrow morning and we will hear you quietly. Any time between nine and eleven. Come in, Teresa."

"What is it all about?" he asked, angrily, in the library.

"How should I know?" she parried, mockingly. "If you keep tame lunatics, or village idiots, I can't be expected to know the forms their folly takes!"

"Did you ever know Willie Johnstone?"

"I shouldn't remember it, if I had! Why should I?"

"Why is he so certain you would?"

"How can I be expected to account for his madness?"

When Gervase went to say good-night to Lady Katherine, he found her stronger, and more collected than he had seen her for some time.

"How is she behaving?" asked the old lady.

"Just as one would expect," answered Arthur, with a shrug of annoyance. "Wanted to take the children to Hugh's; came to Church, and forced me to introduce her to the Desmonds. Tried to be funny with Desmond——"

An angry red flamed on Lady Katherine's cheeks.

"It is an outrageous thing of her to have done, to come back here. Nothing can come of it but trouble. I will not see her or speak to her, Arthur. Do not let her come near me."

"There is one person very anxious to see her," remarked Arthur. "I think you ought to know something about it, Gran. I haven't a notion if there is anything in it or not, but she looked so *caught,* it makes me suspicious. Old Johnstone—Amos Johnstone—has got it into his head that she can tell him something about his son's death. He says she was mixed up in something—I can't make head or tail of it, he gets so excited. He has gone for me twice about it, and threatens to see you; and she came up

while he was talking to me, and he almost threatened her."

There was unmistakeable horror on Lady Katherine's face.

"He is coming here to-morrow, to talk it out."

"He mustn't, Arthur. Don't allow it. Can I trust you to see to it? Oh, how helpless I am here. May God forgive her, for I never can."

Terribly alarmed, Arthur soothed her and begged her not to worry, promising to deal faithfully with Amos Johnstone. When he bade her good-night and hoped she would sleep, she shook her head hopelessly.

"I can't sleep, Arthur. I lie awake hours and hours. Listening to those carts, rumbling along; like Doom. Like your grandfather did. Listening and listening, and hearing them even when they were not there——"

Her voice tailed off into a whisper, and he crept away in deep concern and alarm. There must be something desperately serious in old Johnstone's quest, and half-veiled threats.

The story of his sister's intrigue with a market-garden man leapt back to his mind. He marvelled that he had not thought of it before. Was it Willie Johnstone? And if so, who was the "gentleman friend" of whom old Amos had spoken? It almost seemed as if he were on the verge of discovery of some sort; it might well be a crime.

A crime—of which his grandfather and grandmother had knowledge? A crime, perhaps, committed by Teresa——? The thought made his head swim.

He could easily think of Teresa as murdering her low-born lover!

Next morning, to his surprise, Gervase was told that Lady Katherine would like to see him in her morning-room. He found her, white-faced but resolute, and less feeble than he could have believed possible.

"I am not going to give way any longer," she told him. "I have been more sick in mind than in body, Arthur, and no effort seemed worth while. I have been a coward. But I must take control of things now. Where is Teresa?"

"In the study."

She made him give her his arm to the study door, then asked him to go. Teresa was full length on the sofa with a French comic paper in her hand. She got up, pretty quickly and respectfully, for her.

Lady Katherine seated herself in a big chair, Teresa clearing a space for her to pass. Wherever Teresa was, an accumulation of disorder surrounded her—papers ill-folded, books bent backwards, handkerchiefs, and other personal belongings, and a litter of cigarettes and matches, both new, half-finished, and done with. She lit another cigarette, sat on the sofa in a crouching attitude, and waited.

"I have thought things over," said Lady Katherine, in a hard, unyielding voice; "and I will not have you here. It is an intrusion so indecent that I am surprised even you should attempt it. I will not tolerate it."

Teresa turned an impudently interested face to the

older lady. The expression seemed to say, "And what do you propose to do to prevent it?"

"You will leave here," went on Lady Katherine inexorably, "in three days. I will give orders that a car be ready for you and your luggage; and I will take your ticket to any destination that you desire overseas. I will also arrange for you to be escorted to the ship and kept in sight until you sail. Do you understand?"

"And the children?"

"They will stay here."

"Not unless I do."

"They will stay here."

"Illegitimate children belong by law to their mother," said Teresa, softly. "And these are not English children; they are Australian citizens."

There was a threat in every word.

"If you claim them," said Lady Katherine, unflinchingly, "and you will not get them except by legal pressure, for no one here will help you to take them, and I will put all on their guard—I will take the matter into Court, and show that you are not a fit person to have the custody of children."

Teresa laughed.

"That would suit me down to the ground," she purred. "Then we would have out all the dirty family linen and give it a good washing—at last."

"Do you think I do not know how you rely on that threat, and how you are planning to trade on it?" asked Lady Katherine, with biting scorn. "I know it to be your trump card. And I have hidden so much for the sake of the family credit and for the

sake of my sons and their sons, that no doubt you felt safe in holding that belief. But I have gone as far as I mean to go, and you can push me no farther. I will not be a party to your wickedness any longer, nor will I allow you to have the control of the children. We will have it out now."

"Why should you take so much evil of me for granted?" asked Teresa, her handsome eyes assuming a pathetic intensity.

"It is no use, Teresa. Don't try pathos. It makes even less impression on me than threats. I know why you sent me your children. I know why you had your death put in the paper. I know why you came back."

"It was a good dodge, wasn't it?" remarked Teresa, with a wicked laugh. "It did the trick—fish rose to the fly, instantaneously. Come, Gran; you are a bit of a sportsman, don't spoil sport for others."

"Sport!" echoed Lady Katherine, with so much of bitterness, the younger woman mentally described herself as having drawn blood. "You vile creature. You degrade everything you even speak of. In three days —you understand? You leave this house; and if you want money to go, your destination must be overseas."

Lady Katherine left the room, well aware that by her action she might be precipitating a crisis, yet feeling too much roused to observe caution. And Teresa crouched, staring at the fire, wondering which of the various lines of viciousness open to her she should embark on, wondering how much Johnstone knew, and

how she could escape the deportation Lady Katherine was planning, and yet secure the money that she needed above all things.

Whatever she did, she would have to do quickly; that much was certain.

CHAPTER XIII

LORD GOTTO TAKES A HAND

LORD GOTTO, a man of the most limited perceptions, was deeply and intimately convinced that he was gifted beyond his fellows with the quality of penetration. He could see, he was in the habit of asserting, as far into a brick wall as most people, this being a class of saying to which he was much addicted. "'A nod is as good as a wink' to me, any day" was another favourite (of whose real significance he was blissfully unconscious); and he frequently asserted his mathematical proficiency in the number of beans that made five. In regard to the brick wall proposition, he generally followed it up by adding oracularly, "And a bit further too."

It was on this form of philosophy that he fell back for angry consolation when Mr. Talbot chipped him about warrants for people's arrest; but if Mr. Talbot flattered himself that that ended the matter he never made a greater mistake in his life.

"If that quibbling, hair-splitting lawyer thinks he is going to be able to come the old soldier over me," shouted Lord Gotto to Lady Gotto, who rocked impatiently in her chair because she could not bear any-

one to talk loudly and arrogantly except herself, "he has jolly well got to have a lesson. I'm not the kind of fellow to be barking up the wrong tree, and I'll show him."

And he proceeded to demonstrate his acuteness by prosecuting enquiries in the Sherlock Holmes manner, finding clues and unearthing motives, and tracking accessories, and shouting his deductions aloud across the dinner table to the bored and often rudely-snubbing Lady Gotto, who had no patience with his foolishness, nor indeed with that of anybody else except her own and the people who flattered her. And he talked in the first-class carriages in which he travelled with all his personal luggage on the seats; and at hotels and at his club and on the golf-course; until Mr. Talbot's friends felt seriously uneasy and everybody else was bored stiff.

At Tenterley's, the subject of my lord's obsession was touched on. The evening gatherings in the little shop were still a feature of the village life. The old police constable had joined the great majority, and a younger but very chatty officer was in his place. The flippant postman had died a hero's death in South Africa, and the coalman had found a better job in London; but their successors frequented Tenterley's, and hobnobbed with the market-garden carters, and chatted with parson and school-master and organist as of old.

Constable Thomas, large, florid, impressive, spread himself importantly on the one substantial seat that would stand a constable's normal weight; and Turton,

on a short, hard bench, smoked reflectively, one knee crossed over the other and an elbow on the knee. Tenterley, engaged in a delicate operation on a carved picture frame, sat low near his bench, his keen eyes half hidden between a myriad little lines and puckers that gave a quaint character of cheeriness to his honest, acute old face. On the table, one leg dangling, sat a young carter, breathing a beery fragrance, just out from feeding his horses and refreshing his own inner man.

Two other men lounged in the doorway. One was an elderly carter, the other the bird-seed and poultry-food man from over the way. In a far corner, dejected and forlorn, sat Amos Johnstone, his pipe out, his eyes fixed on the empty fireplace in unhappy reverie.

"Well, constable, you did ought to know," laughed one of the carters. "They got you prop'ly tied up in the coort, they did, the other morning."

There was a laugh at the constable's expense, in which he joined good-naturedly.

"There's noon but makes mistakes, times," he said. "I've heerd worse nor than 'un, in the coorts."

"Ah." With wise interest and agreement.

"Mr. Talbot, he says to me, I had to pull you up, Thomas, and sharp, too, he says. It wouldn't a looked well if I'd a passed it without rebuke, he says. But, he says, he knows what a job like mine be, and he won't hold it over against me, he says; nice and fair, he spoke. He's a real gentleman, is Mr. Talbot, and about the best justice on the Bench in these parts—

and I don't know that there's many to beat him elsewhere."

"Ah," nodded Tenterley, in agreement. "A very fine gentleman, is Mr. Talbot. Very different kind from that oold Gotto that's always trying to make himself soo important."

"Proper meddling old 'ooman, that old Gotto," remarked the young carter. "What's this bee he has got in his bonnet about Mr. Desmond, now?"

Tenterley lifted his head sharply and crinkled up his eyelids; the constable leaned forward and looked interested.

"What's he saying about Mr. Desmond?" asked Turton.

"Says that a warrant ought to be out for his arrest, 'cos of complicity in that case about the body nigh to Farmer Johnstone's sheds. Always on to Mr. Talbot about it, he is."

"Now who did you hear that from, Jim Caston?"

"From gardener at Fairlands Park. They do send a powerful lot of stuff to market from there—a heap more than from The Domain, which it's a dirty shame, I call it, seeing as how they could afford to give it away, to hospitals and the like, but they never gives a fardenworth away. Gardener, he was telling me. Shouts it, he does, at breakfast, dinner, and tea, for to let everybody hear."

"But what does he think Mr. Desmond had to do with it?" asked Turton, staring.

"Says it is plain that that there murder was what

made him clear off all them years. He has it, old Gotto has, that it were body of that Mr. Marx, the son of the millingnaire that died not so long ago. His son—the millingnaire's son—he was kidnapped or decoyed, or something like that, with a big sum of money on him, and never heerd of no more."

"And Mr. Desmond, what has pots of money of his own, did it to get the money? Goo on!" said Tenterley, scornfully.

Constable Thomas watched them all, leaning forward, arms on his knees; and saw old Johnstone listening with a greedy, craving expression that caught his attention.

"It was a queer story, that about Mr. Desmond," he ventured.

"Ay. Queer and crooked," said Tenterley, curtly. He had championed the missing man stoutly, and felt personally cheated when he returned.

"Noo one wou'dn't have believed it," said the birdseed man, affably. "And my niece, she's housemaid at Gotto's, she says that it's fair crool to hear the way the old man goos on about the crime, as he calls it; not that Mr. Desmond don't deserve all he get, after the way he behave."

"Ah, but there's a lot of diff'rence 'tween playing it up on a woman, or with a woman, as you might say, and taking a man's life," opined the other carter. "Mr. Desmond, he treated his wife crool, he did. But that's not to say he committed murder."

"Well," said Tenterley, tartly, "we were all wrong

before, so we'd best not be too sartain now. And if Mr. Desmond killed young Mr. Marx, perhaps it would be a better excuse for him than if he hadn't. I was thinking, he might have killed him for something that wasn't the money!"

"Both after the same girl," nodded the young carter. "Very likely; and the money would come in handy to get away with. Well, it's a funny place. People appear, and disappear, and there's no explanation——" he broke off abruptly.

"There's explanations, all right," interrupted Amos Johnstone, standing up and cutting him short. "There's explanations. But them as has them to give wun't give them. I never spoke much of it afore, but Mr. Desmond, he might tell something about my Willie, and so might Miss Teresa, if they was arxked."

He looked so wrought up, so flushed, that they all thought him fit for some mad deed that in truth would get him, finally, "put away" as insane. And when he pushed his way to the door and turned up the lane, they stood in the road looking after him, and making comment according to their kind.

When Johnstone got to the broad, planted road on which the front entrances to The Meadows and The Leas were situated, and which meandered pleasantly on to Farmer Johnstone's farm, The Homestead, he paused. Full of schemes, plots, mysteries, and unravelment of them, as his poor mind was, it tended to make him cunning and suspicious.

"I wun't," he said to himself. "If he's that sort,

he'd have *me* made away with too; and I got to find out about my Willie. I mustn't let myself be made away with. I'll go to this 'ere Lord Gotto."

It was a harder job than he bargained for, to get past the careless but nervous household staff to an interview with the bawling lord. Some of the servants at Fairlands Park were afflicted with their master's vice of arrogance, some of them too much afraid of him to chance his anger. Johnstone had not the knack of making himself seem of importance.

He haunted the gates of the drive until afraid the lodge-keepers would give him in charge as a suspicious character. And at last the great car came whizzing along. Luckily it was an awkward turn, and the driver had to slow down; otherwise Johnstone would never have had the courage to stop them.

"What's he want?" bawled Lord Gotto. "Wants to speak to me? What the devil about? Who is he?"

"My name's Johnstone, Amos Johnstone, brother of Farmer Bartholomew Johnstone, of the Homestead Farm, Lower Domain, where the body of an unknown man was found," said Johnstone, gabbling off his long-prepared speech. "It is about the body, my lord. I want to speak to you; private, arxking your pardon."

"I can't speak to you now!" retorted Lord Gotto, angrily. Then, as Johnstone made no further suggestion, the shouting peer ordered him to come to the Park next morning at eleven. Then he bawled at the chauffeur to drive on.

He was full of his own perspicacity in so working up the affair that "information was beginning to roll

in, to roll in," and made it his chief topic of conversation for the day. It naturally endeared him greatly to the members of his club in whose hearing he lunched, and to his family later on.

When Johnstone got to the Park next morning, he found Mr. Talbot as well as Lord Gotto. On a spasm of confidence which he afterwards regretted, Lord Gotto had sent for the J.P. to teach him his lesson.

Poor old Johnstone! His tale, about his lost Willie, was a very halting one. Got into bad company, and misappropriated what was trusted to him, for gambling and drinking. Knew a "gentleman," who "thought a lot of him." The "gentleman" was a lover of Missie at The Domain, and they all disappeared together.

"*All* disappeared?" roared Lord Gotto. "What the devil do you mean?"

"Just try and explain, Johnstone," said Mr. Talbot, gently. "Don't shout at him, Gotto. You confuse him. Come, my good man; your son—did he disappear suddenly——"

"He never came to say good-bye," mournfully insisted Johnstone, "and I had a penny or two put by, that I promised to hand him. But he never came, nor never wrote; and the young lady, she wuz gone too, and they saying at The Domain that she had been sent back to her mother, but not a bit of luggage left the house till more'n ten days later, and wuz sent to the big station—Victoria, 'twas, I think—in London—ten days after I saw her goo off with the gentleman that wuz her sweetheart. He used to meet my Willie over

there by the sheds, where the manure heaps wuz. Some game they had on there that I couldn't get the hang on, but many a time I saw them there—a bigger man than my Willie; and one to swear! I don't know that I ever heard anyone lay to it like that. And my Willie told me, the young lady liked him fine too—my Willie, I mean; not the other. He used to come and goo in the market-carts, the other gentleman did; all hidden up. I never said no word till now, out of respec' for the fam'ly, and Milady so good to my pore wife when she lay a-dying, and reading the Bible to her, and the Squire stopping and arxking for her every day, and they giving my Willie his very first little pair of breeches——"

"What a thoroughly disreputable business," bellowed Lord Gotto, as old Johnstone paused. "It is high time it was shown up. And this goes on under our nose; immoral intrigues and God knows what besides —murders wholesale—wholesale."

"There is no question of any murder yet," remarked Mr. Talbot, "other than the one we know of already. What makes you want to rake all this up, Johnstone? Do you imagine the body you found was this man who was your son's friend?"

"Yes, Mr. Talbot, sir. And I wants the ground turned all round them shedses. My boy's lying there too, somewhere about; and he's got the same call to be tuck up and put in holy ground, the same as the other. He's got his rights to that, and to have his name cleared. I wants to see it done afore I goos, so's I may rest easy. I got a right to my rest; it's

all that I got to look forrard to, and I wants to rest easy."

"And will your brother consent to allow this to be done?"

Johnstone shook his head.

"Not without some of the gentry getting at him," he admitted, mournfully.

"But look here, Johnstone. The young lady—she is not young any longer—*she* is back. She seems to have been principally concerned in all this intrigue; you say you saw her go off with her lover. If she is back, why don't you ask her?"

"I arxked her, Mr. Talbot, sir. I arxked her and Master Arthur—that's Major Gervase, sir. And she outfaced me that she knew nothing at all about me or my Willie; and Major Gervase, he said to come and see him in the study, but when I came, he saw me in the yard and said he couldn't discuss it."

"I thought you said you hadn't told anybody else," roared Lord Gotto, with such suddenness that Johnstone dropped his hat.

"I didn't tell, my lord. 'Cos why, they all knoo about it already! I arxkt; I didn't tell. I arxkt them to tell me what become of my boy, which she and her spark, they promise him all sorts of things. And all she says was, 'Is it a joke or a lunacy?' And Major Gervase, he 'can't discuss it'!"

The wail of anguish in the man's voice reached Mr. Talbot's heart.

"Would you like me to speak to Major Gervase for you?" he asked.

The look of gratitude on Johnstone's face was even more pathetic than his quavering voice.

"And if you could persuade my brother, Mr. Talbot, sir, to have that there ground turned over," he pursued, thanking both the gentlemen effusively, and taking a humble leave.

"I never heard such a tale in my life!" said Lord Gotto, loudly and angrily, making horrid sucking noises with his teeth and taking not the slightest notice of Johnstone's humble farewell. "It's disgraceful, that's what it is. Disgraceful. It ought to be shown up; and by heaven, Talbot, I'll see to it that it is."

"Well," said Mr. Talbot, mildly, "it hasn't got anything to do with either Mr. Desmond or young Marx, has it?"

This put Lord Gotto in a fury.

"How do we know it hasn't? How do we know how many more people were involved? Half the country-side might have been in it, for all we know!"

"In what?" asked Mr. Talbot. "Stealing Farmer Johnstone's market stuff, or making love to the Gervase girl?"

"I'll tell you what's wrong with you, Talbot," said Lord Gotto, loudly and firmly. "You have no faculty of deduction. You can't see when two and two make four. You don't see what is sticking out under your nose. I can see as far into a brick wall as most men—perhaps a bit further—and *I* don't require to hear a policeman swear one lie and half a dozen witnesses swear more lies, before I know what's what, and who's who."

"And what *is* what, and who *is* who, and what is it that is in the brick wall, or under my nose, in this particular matter?"

Mr. Talbot was nettled.

"I can find you in evidence, Talbot, but I can't find you in brains to assimilate it," shouted Lord Gotto, in what was intended to be genial waggishness. "You wait for your policeman, old man, and your experts; and your witnesses. They'll tell you all about it! Come in to lunch. Let's tell milady."

Mr. Talbot was not a man to take hasty action, or to intrude in people's affairs without just and sound reasons. In this case, so vague, so involved, he could see no reason that would avail him except the plea for poor old Johnstone's peace of mind. He could hardly in decency drag up Teresa Gervase's youthful love affairs, no matter how discreditable; and to expect her brother to discuss them with him to please Johnstone was altogether too preposterous. Yet, in his capacity as a justice, he felt he had a clear right to ask that all information should be given to the old man to prove, either that his son and his son's friend or associate had nothing to do with the remains found in the place where they used to foregather; or failing that, what the fate of that son had been.

He called on Farmer Bartholomew Johnstone first. It was decidedly the least unpleasing of the two interviews.

Farmer Johnstone was angry, impatient and scornful; and did not want to waste his time over nonsense. Amos was a pore daft old fool. What did people listen

to un fur? If all the dafties was to get listened to, the world 'ud be a queer place. Darned sight queerer nor what it is already.

Mr. Talbot pointed out that Lord Gotto was quite determined to re-open the question of the identity of the body found near the manure-heaps. Amos's grievance was well-known; it was no new thing. It gave colour to a lot of suspicions that might cause annoyance to quite innocent people. And he, personally, would think it a great favour if Farmer Johnstone would allow a thorough overhauling of the premises. Lord Gotto would make good all damage and inconvenience.

When he left, Farmer Johnstone had promised, grudgingly and conditionally, that he would think it over and let Mr. Talbot know—a state of things, in regard to the class of person to which Farmer Johnstone belonged, which might reasonably be looked upon as meaning that he was agreeable to the proposition and only not wishing to be hustled into carrying it out at any except his own time.

Mr. Talbot rightly regarded this as a moral and actual triumph; and it heartened him for the far more difficult interview with Major Gervase, towards which he looked with profound distaste and wished he had not in his good nature undertaken it.

Gervase, too, was anything but pleased. He received Mr. Talbot with cordiality; but stiffened when that gentleman broached his reason for calling. After a sharp exchange of compliment, Mr. Talbot fired off a shot in good earnest.

"Your sister, Major Gervase—forgive me for being so plain—has not got a good reputation in this part of the world. She, too, left the village under a very serious cloud, and—if I may venture to say so, in rather a strange fashion. She is, so far as we know, the last person who saw young Johnstone. It was her lover who met him at the Homestead Farm, near those sheds of Johnstone's. It is quite possible that young Johnstone was the murderer of that lover, in some quarrel about her; and that the remains found were those of this unknown person, this lover. I think it is most important that she should make a statement; and in my capacity as a justice, it is my business to see that she does. If she will not, we can only come to one conclusion, and that is, that she was an accomplice in some serious crime."

It was the purest bluff, but he felt it to be justified. And Arthur did not know enough to recognise it as bluff. He was seriously alarmed.

"You cannot expect me to want to have my sister's name dragged into all this," he protested. "It will be terrible for Lady Katherine; and there are the youngsters—Good Heavens! It will be a horrible business. Besides, when you have stirred it all up and made everybody uncomfortable, what do you expect to find? It is perfectly absurd to suggest that a girl of that age got all these men to murder each other!"

He talked at random, to gain time.

"Will your sister see me?" asked Mr. Talbot, gravely.

"She is not up," answered Gervase, thankful that

Teresa's slovenly habits kept her in bed until all hours. "I will ask her and will let you know what she says; and I must be guided by that as to what I shall tell my grandmother."

"I should not allow a long delay, if I were you," said Mr. Talbot, significantly.

"And I shall certainly not put pressure on either of them," retorted Arthur. "If there is anything unpleasant that you feel it your duty to do, you must take full responsibility for it. I think you are riding on a very false scent and will look a fool for your pains. I suppose we have that consummate old idiot Gotto to thank for this!"

This conclusion did not please Mr. Talbot, and he left in an ill-humour that a subsequent encounter with the Sherlock Holmesing peer did nothing to allay.

CHAPTER XIV

TERESA'S TALONS

THE result of Lady Katherine's interview with Teresa, as might have been expected, was another collapse, and a period of weakness that kept her to her bed. Teresa secretly rejoiced in the midst of everyone else's distress. Hoping for the old lady's death, she realised that it would leave her free to remain and to act as she pleased. For she knew Arthur to be too weak, and too much afraid of her, to take any strong steps to dislodge her.

That Lady Katherine might die was her chief hope. Nothing would suit her book better. The three days passed without anything further being said about her departure.

Lady Katherine was perfectly conscious of all this, but too weak to take any action for the moment.

When Arthur told Teresa of Mr. Talbot's visit, she went into peals of mocking laughter. Not a word would she say that had any bearing on the situation. Nevertheless, she took stock of things and found them awkward.

She had come on a perfectly definite quest, to which she was prepared to devote as much leisure and energy

as it required. This raking up of old and entirely uninteresting scandals was going to interfere with and handicap her activities. Suppose they found Willie Johnstone——? She did not like dwelling on that possibility.

Poisonous old fool, Johnstone. Pity someone could not make him put his head in a bag. An asylum was the proper place for him, anyway.

On Sunday, in church, the sly malice in her eyes was noticeable to the most casual observer, and was commented on at Tenterley's, where it was opined that, no matter what it were that she had come back for, she were up to no good.

After lunch, Hugh came round. Bad accounts of Lady Katherine's condition had reached him; and he rode over to enquire. He was not a bad-hearted man, and was genuinely sorry.

Arthur brought him in to the library, where they smoked and drank whiskies, until Teresa intruded.

"My long-lost brother!" she exclaimed, dramatically, with her wide smile.

"Pity you aren't my entirely-lost-sister," he retorted, uncompromisingly. "What mischief has brought you back here? Something shady, I presume?"

"Well, I don't exactly know whether you are just the person to put on airs about that!" countered Teresa, with effect.

"I suppose it is your welcome arrival that has knocked Gran out of time," continued Hugh, unruffled.

"I'm afraid my family is not as affectionately disposed as it ought to be," sighed Teresa.

"You may flatter yourself," assured Hugh, "that there is not one living soul in the world who is glad you are alive."

"It is a great tribute," agreed Teresa, solemnly.

Then Arthur appealed to Hugh.

"Look here, Hugh. Do you remember anything about her carryings-on, just before she went away? There is a fuss being made about a fellow called Johnstone—one Willie Johnstone, who was in the market-garden business. His father wants to know what became of him, and declares that Teresa knows."

"I remember Johnstone all right," said Hugh, readily. "He used to come here to collect stuff. There was an arrangement—there still is, isn't there?—about having our stuff taken up to market; he used to come here, and see it loaded up."

"Did you ever see him and Teresa together?"

"She always had a lot to say to him," replied Hugh, crumpling up his forehead in an effort to remember. "I had the room in the Old Tower for a workshop, and I often used to see her and him. He used to go down with her into the cellar."

"He used to?" in extreme surprise.

"Yes. Some yarn about the mushroom beds. She used to say old whatsisname didn't understand them."

"When did you last see him, Hugh?"

"Oh, I really can't remember."

"Did you ever see a friend of his—a big man, fair, who used frightful language?"

Hugh shook his head.

All through this dialogue, Teresa stood, apparently

unmoved, her elbow on the mantelpiece, one foot on the fender, her splendid eyes flashing backwards and forwards between the two brothers who hated her. At mention of the big, fair man who used frightful language she shifted her position and looked down at her beautifully shod feet.

"What did you do down the cellar with Will Johnstone?" suddenly fired off Arthur.

"Mind your own business," retorted Teresa.

The two men left the room in silence, and with one accord found their steps leading them to the Old Tower. Taking the keys from Adams's nail, they swung open the big door and went in to investigate. Lance and Guin were just making for The Meadows and peeped in with them.

"Can't we have Uncle Hugh's room for a playroom?" they pleaded. "We've always meant to ask you, Uncle Arthur."

"I don't see why not," agreed Arthur carelessly. "I'll tell Adams to clean it up. Run away now."

The children departed, in high feather; and the investigation proceeded, without, however, revealing traces of Willie Johnstone or his fate.

Teresa passed them as they emerged, dusty and cobwebby, and laughed her mocking laugh. She went out at the little door into the lane.

The enquiry about Willie Johnstone was getting annoying. She felt that her other business might be interfered with materially.

Mr. Desmond nearly always went for a walk with one or other of his daughters, on Sunday afternoon.

It was his old habit; singling out the children in turn. Teresa walked up and down the lane two or three times, before he came out. He had Kythe with him—a reluctant, rather sullen Kythe, who revolted from her father's company.

"Oh, Mr. Desmond; this is quite fortunate," purred Teresa, in her deep voice.

Mr. Desmond looked, on the contrary, as if it were quite unfortunate.

"My boy and girl are at your house, I believe? I wonder if your daughter would be so very kind as to find them and tell them I want them to come for a walk?"

Kythe went, demurely and without alacrity. She no more enjoyed running errands for Mrs. Gervase than going for walks with her father; and she knew Lance and Guin would simply hate being fetched away by their mother.

She passed in at the gate, and Mr. Desmond stood, looking embarrassed, but more stubborn than embarrassed. What Teresa said to him was in a peremptory whisper. At first he looked angry, then startled, then sullen; and she cut in again with a ripple of quick, incisive whispering.

When Kythe came out with Lance and Guin, they all went for a walk together. The brutal tone was in Mr. Desmond's voice, and malice indescribable in Teresa's eye. They talked in low tones with short sentences and long pauses.

Gervase went home with his brother, and paid his respects to Mrs. Hugh. Her dyed head looked ap-

palling, ridiculous as a pretence and crude as an artistic effect. The salve and powder combined were peeling flakes off her lips, and her nose had a whitened end that looked like a clown's. She was a good-natured creature, and said the right things about Lady Katherine, and surprised Arthur by the quite charming manners in which she had trained her little girl.

"We christened her Katherine, you see," explained Mrs. Hugh. "So we had to have her brought up to behave nice."

Arthur responded gratefully, made himself agreeable to the vulgar sisters, and went on to the Manor Farm, where he poured out his perplexities to Tom Leigh and Mr. and Mrs. Raymond, who were on their way to the Mission Church in a distant corner of the parish. Mr. Raymond was genuinely shocked.

"And if that dreadful Lord Gotto has got hold of it," said Aunt Hermione, "it will be worse than the bell-man!"

He stayed and dined with the Leighs, making his way home with the hope of finding Kythe in the lane. After a little dawdling, he heard the click of the latch, and she came. It was some days since they had had a meeting, and he drew her inside the garden door, among some bushes and held her close in his arms.

Neither spoke. He kissed her several times, conscious that her lips were passionate and unchildlike, and enjoying it, the while it made him uneasy. She laid her face in his neck, and leaned against him, with little sighs of restful content.

Neither of them noticed the passing of time until a faint beat of footsteps fell on their ears. Steps were coming down the lane, leisurely, measured; a pair of lingering sweethearts, it sounded like.

"Let them go past," whispered Kythe, a little nervously. She reached out her hand and pushed the door to, without noise.

The footsteps came near, growing more audible. The pair were in no hurry, whoever they were.

Near the door they paused. Gervase clasped Kythe a little closer and kissed her mouth, in sudden sympathy with the lovers outside, who, presumably, were doing the same.

Then the door was pushed half open. The murmuring voices in the lane became more distinct.

"You will let me know when I can see you again?"

The rich, purring tones were very recognisable.

"Yes. But we'll have to be jolly careful. Don't talk here. It is not safe."

"Good-night, Dave."

There was the sound of a brief kiss, a low-toned wicked laugh, and Desmond stepped over the threshold, shutting the door with extreme caution behind him. Walking on the grass borders, he reached the house almost without a sound, and got in by his study window.

Gervase felt Kythe stiffen in his arms. In utter, unmoving silence they stood, so horrified at the revelation flashed on them, as hardly even to be relieved at their own escape from detection. They heard the faint sounds of Mr. Desmond's careful progress, and as if

in accompaniment, the quick springy footsteps of the woman who went on down the lane. When the steps paused, both strained every nerve to catch the sound they knew would come next—the sucking plug of The Domain garden door, faint in the distance.

"Go in, darling," said Gervase, tenderly. "Go in and go to bed, and don't think about it until to-morrow. I'll come over and see you to-morrow."

She said never a word; only held him tight, and kissed him, and trembled dreadfully. He watched her go, with a heart wrung with pity and shame and deepest concern.

What a devil Teresa was!

Thoughts, horrible thoughts, held him in thrall all night. He had made love to young Kythe, in what the girl could not but believe to be earnest; and he had definitely envisaged the thought of marrying her. And here he was, involved in a sort of secret intrigue with her, while his sister had a shameful one with her father. It was as vile a situation as could well be devised.

What a devil Teresa was!

He tossed and turned, unrested and uncomforted, and wondered what in the world he ought to do.

Lady Katherine was better next day, and he sat with her awhile, avoiding the subject of Teresa and such-like disquieting matters. He told her that Hugh had been, and that he had called on Mrs. Hugh. The day passed wearily and lengthily; in the late afternoon he went over to The Meadows.

Hero and Kythe, with Guin, were having tea in the play-room, and Guin was recounting vaingloriously Uncle Arthur's promise to let her and Lance have the Tower for a playroom.

"And Lance says we must look for secret panels and doorways with springs," she added, hopefully. "Here's Uncle Arthur! Uncle Arthur, do you *think* there'll be a secret panel in the playroom of the Tower?"

"I should be very much surprised if there were," answered Gervase, swinging himself over the window sill. "May is coming in a minute, Hero, and she says you're not to eat all the almond icing, because she'll want some."

He talked, lightly enough, until Lance turned up, and then rose to go.

"Coming to see me to the lane?" he asked, catching Kythe's arm.

"Have you told anyone?" he asked her.

"No," said Kythe. "Ought I?"

"Heaven knows," answered he.

"Oh, Arthur, take me away. Take me away from this horrible house and all these things that make me feel as if I were going mad. It doesn't seem like real life, our lives. It seems like nightmares. And Mother is going to die. I know she is going to die, and I can't bear it. I don't want to be here to see it. I should kill him."

"Very well," said Arthur, setting his teeth and making up his mind. "I'll tell your father I am going

to marry you, and I'll arrange with your Uncle Harry for you to have a year with him on the Continent first. He said he did not want to come home yet, didn't he?"

"Oh, yes," cried Kythe. "And said he was lonely, too; and they were talking of May going out to him."

"And I can come and see you now and then," resumed Gervase. "And when your mother is all right again—of course she will be all right, you goosie—we will be married. I'll talk to Gran about it tonight."

Making up his mind to the effort, he went to Lady Katherine's room after dinner.

"Gran! I have been making up my mind. I want a wife and heirs of my own, as poor young Lance can't inherit; and I am thinking of marrying the little Desmond girl. Would you be pleased, or would you hate it?"

There was a long and horrible pause.

The old lady's face was grey and stricken. In her distress she could find no words, she only moaned and drew deep, painful breaths.

"I am afraid it is quite impossible, Arthur."

He caught the faint whisper.

"Why, Gran, dear?"

Again a painful pause. Then,

"Teresa—because of her—she has been a curse to us, Arthur."

With difficulty he heard the words, so faint was her voice.

"I did not know you knew about that," he said, greatly pained. "But if you send her away, Gran, need it matter so much?"

He thought he heard the reply, something about "the children," but rose to get her some brandy and then refused to let her say more. He wandered up the lane and found Kythe waiting for him, and in the shelter of the climbing rose bushes, where there was a small rustic seat, they sat in forlorn comradeship for a long time. Kythe was horrified to hear that Lady Katherine knew about her father's aberration.

A little after ten, Mr. Desmond came stealthily along the walk, treading on the grass. He opened the door and was joined by someone outside. A long exchange of whispering took place, and he accompanied his companion down the lane, and, apparently, into The Domain garden. Kythe cried passionately and begged Gervase to get her away; and even suggested going for Aunt Hermione and getting her to come and confront her brother with his wickedness.

They were still talking, less agitatedly, when the door in the wall opened stealthily and Mr. Desmond came in.

"Who is there?" he asked, suddenly and sharply, with a sound in his throat that was almost bloodthirsty.

"I am, Mr. Desmond," answered Gervase. "Arthur Gervase."

"What are you doing?"

The threat in his tone was unmistakable.

"I think," answered Gervase, stirred to wrath by the attempt to bully him, "that my conduct is quite as defensible as—yours."

"What might you mean by that?" asked Mr. Des-

mond, in the same tone; "and whom have you there with you? Kythe? What is the meaning of this?"

He spoke curtly, contemptuously, in tones that stung.

"I don't know what particular right you have to ask," returned Gervase. "Shall we come inside and talk it over, or would you prefer to come—back to The Domain?"

He emphasised the word "back."

"Come in," said Desmond, curtly.

In his study, he turned on the light and sat with his back to it. Kythe, her fear gone, looked him unflinchingly in the face, with the steady gaze of hatred.

"May I receive an explanation?" asked Mr. Desmond.

"Certainly. I want to marry your daughter, and came this evening to tell her that my grandmother considers your intrigue with my sister, which she has unfortunately discovered, a very strong objection to such an arrangement."

There was a long, long silence.

Then Mr. Desmond dropped his head on his arms and broke down.

His terrible sobs sounded loud in the shocked hush of their voices. The scar on his head glistened angrily. Not another word was spoken. Once when Gervase moved a little in his chair, the noise seemed monstrous and indecent. They might have sat like that for hours had not the strange sympathy that had often operated so oddly, brought Mrs. Desmond down to her husband's room.

They rose as she entered, but she took little notice of them. Her eyes were for the sobbing man with the bowed head. Shielding him from their sight with her body, and putting a tender hand round his convulsed throat, she motioned them impatiently away. They crept from the room with guilty stealth, shutting the door behind them.

Gervase sped away to the Rectory, leaving Kythe with May and Hero. None of the brothers were at home.

To the Raymonds he told all he knew, and walked back with them to The Meadows. Mr. and Mrs. Desmond were still in the study; his strangling sobs had died down, there was a low murmur of voices. No one liked to go in.

It was late before any one slept, and Mr. Desmond was pathetically grateful for his sister's ministrations. For, obviously, Mrs. Desmond was none the better for the storm of emotion through which they had passed, and Dr. Willett was sent for the first thing in the morning.

How much of confidence had passed between husband and wife, no one knew. Mr. Desmond was out early, as was his wont; and took his place at the breakfast table with very nearly his usual appearance. Neither he nor Mrs. Desmond said anything to Kythe. Her shy eyes shunned her father's face, and her manner, in her mother's room, was uneasy and evasive. She had no notion if Mrs. Desmond had been told of the incident in which Gervase had

taken a part. Gervase waited for the Raymonds to do or say something that would give him a lead, but they, too, were at fault, and knew not what to say or advise.

In the next few days, all sorts of things happened with a rush. Farmer Johnstone suddenly made up his mind that it was his dooty to do something to please the gentry; and set several labourers to work to clear the accumulations of rubbish from round the old sheds, where the manure-heaps lay, preparatory to a series of excavations. This gave rise to tremendous excitement; and anyone who had leisure drifted round without apology to watch the operations, exchange reflections with Farmer Johnstone, and drink some of the home-brewed for which the Homestead Farm was famous.

Gervase, on the other hand, unsettled and uncertain of himself, threw his energies into the task of converting Hugh's deserted workshop in the Old Tower into a suitable room for Lance and Guin. Teresa, malicious and mocking, came at pretty frequent intervals to gibe and sneer and laugh mysterious laughs that conveyed no idea of the cause of her merriment. Her presence was never welcome, and always brought a certain amount of irritation.

Lance, with a steady concentration on his own fad, made minute and diligent search for the secret panel or spring door which he had set his heart on finding. There was as little in the room, old though it was, as there was in Farmer Johnstone's manure-heaps, to encourage any such fancy; yet by a coin-

cidence, both sets of searchers found something for which they little bargained, on one and the same day.

It was Guin's clever fingers, and not Lance's patience and perseverance, that brought them to the goal of discovery.

CHAPTER XV

MR. DESMOND'S CHILDREN

KYTHE heard from Guin that Uncle Arthur was busy about the room; but she did not feel that it was business important enough to keep him away from her after what had happened. She fretted and lay awake and wondered how things could possibly work themselves out; and then made up her mind to have it settled one way or the other. Her mother needed constant care, and Mr. Desmond spent so much of his time with her that there was no opportunity, even had Kythe had the inclination, for confidences. Mrs. Desmond was, as May had said, almost entirely monopolised and cut off from her children by the objectionable man who was their father; and Kythe felt lost, lonely and desperate.

She came to the Tower room, at the invitation of Lance and Guin, and sat, watching Gervase, as he directed the removal of the ugly fire-grate that spoilt the room. When the men had gone, Gervase came and sat beside her in the deep window-seat. Lance and Guin had dived into the cellar, engrossed in some piece of vandalism for the beautifying of the upstairs room.

"Are you going to speak to my father again?" asked Kythe, her face burning.

"If you like," said Gervase, looking troubled. "Had I not better write?"

"Yes, perhaps," answered Kythe, after consideration. Then added, "He'll say no."

"Why?"

"I know he will," asserted Kythe. "It is too mixed up." By this she was alluding to her father's intrigue with Gervase's sister.

Gervase nodded, understandingly.

"What are we to do, then?" he asked, grasping his nettle.

She hung her head for a moment.

"Will you take me away?" she whispered.

"I could not do that, sweetheart," he replied. "It would be too disgraceful. People would think me a hound, and quite right too. Remember how young you are, darling. But I would try and get Gran to fix it up. I shall have trouble with her too, you know. She was fearfully bowled over when I told her about you."

"How did she get to know about Mrs. Gervase?" asked Kythe, anxiously; and Gervase admitted that he had not liked to ask her.

"But what are we to do about it?" asked the girl. "We knew . . . about each other before they began it. Why should we let it interfere?"

"We won't," said Gervase, drawing her to his side and kissing the masses of soft fawn hair that were so irresistibly inviting. "Only wait a bit, Kythe dar-

ling. Wait till your mother is all right, and Teresa gone. Gran does not intend her to stay here, and we will soon be rid of her."

"Really?"

They started guiltily apart. Teresa was just outside the door, and Gervase had inadvertently raised his voice in speaking the last sentences.

She looked at them with mocking, wicked eyes.

"Do you really think so?" she gibed. "Do you think you will get rid of me as easily as that? I can assure you——" she was in one of her evil moods and was lashing herself to fury, "it isn't quite such a simple proposition. I have a tighter grip than you seem to understand, and a closer relationship. Have you any idea, poor dear innocent turtle doves, billing and cooing so confidingly; have you any idea who Lance and Guin's father is, I wonder?"

Kythe stared at her, fascinated. The evil face was convulsed with passion; the woman had lost all her grace of distinction with her hold over her temper.

"Look at Guin's hands, if you want to find out. There is another pair, the dead spit of them, not so far off. Clever hands," with extreme sarcasm.

"Hands always doing something that isn't their job —hanging pictures, for instance."

There was a dead silence. Then Kythe fainted.

Teresa sheered off, laughing her hateful laugh; and Gervase was left to face the situation.

He took the girl home without one word being exchanged. Only when he said good-bye did he kiss her, long and lingeringly, with despair in his heart.

The kisses comforted her a little; but when he was gone, she bethought her that perhaps he had intended them for farewell, and in her misery felt as if her heart must burst.

As for Gervase, words will not describe his state of mind. He could not think out the thing that had been flung at him. Thought refused to come, refused to work, recoiled from the task set her. He could only feel furious, baffled, sickened, defrauded.

Marriage with Kythe was, beyond doubt, out of the question. That much stood out clear. The rest was a confused jumble, in which the disappearance of Mr. Desmond, the announcement of Teresa's death and Mr. Desmond's sudden return, the remains found at the Homestead, young Johnstone, and Lady Katherine's mysterious illness and distress, were inextricably mixed. He could not sort it out. His mind rejected it; his soul sickened at it.

What a devil Teresa was.

A vision of immeasurable scandal rose before his eyes, a sea of infamy and exposure in which their name would be sullied beyond bearing. Why did not someone murder Teresa? How had such a woman escaped? He thought poorly of Australians, that they could ever have let her survive.

"I'd swing for her," he muttered savagely, "if I hadn't got other people to think of."

What was it he had promised Kythe—to write to her father? How damned silly that sounded now. Kythe—little Kythe—Good God! The mere thought of her, and the memory of her stricken face, sent the

blood rushing uncontrollably through him. It would be nothing to be surprised at, if he were to murder Teresa!

What a devil she was!

That woman, and that man, responsible for those nice kids—it was like a practical joke of the Creator's. Not much chance of decency, poor little beggars, if the laws of heredity count for anything—unless they skipped an influence here and there. Kythe—little Kythe—his daughter, too. How did such a scoundrel come to have such a child? He roused himself with a start and found he had nearly reached the Manor Farm. Turning abruptly on his steps, he went to Redlands to find Hugh.

Hugh, casual, stolid, easy-going, sat with his feet on the table, and shouted a welcome. After a short time, it dawned on him that his brother was unnerved, and he pushed the whisky towards him remindingly.

It astonished him, however, to see how greedily Arthur swallowed one drink after another.

"I say," he remonstrated. "Aren't you going it rather? Not that I mind, but it's not exactly your form. Anything up?"

"Yes. Came to tell you about it."

"Teresa?"

"Yes. And Desmond."

"Lord! Since when?"

Arthur sat forward, staring into the fire as if hypnotised.

"About fifteen years," he replied, slowly. "Must

have gone away together. He is the father of those children."

This time Hugh had no expression to fill the bill. He sat silent, and they stared at each other.

"Hugh, old man," began Arthur, "I was going to marry the little girl—the Desmond girl." He could not bring himself to say Kythe's name. "It's the devil, old chap, what?"

Hugh expressed sympathy in a queer way he had—without words, but with sounds and grunts that were convincing if unusual; and both smoked on, occasionally taking a pull at their glasses.

By and by Hugh spoke.

"What you going to do?"

"God knows!" sighed Arthur, in such desolation that Hugh grunted again and drew his chair nearer, putting a hand on the back of his brother's chair.

"How did you find out?"

"Spat it at us—Teresa did—me and the little girl. She fainted."

This time Hugh's sounds of sympathy were of the most bloodthirsty character.

"There's a lot more to it," announced Arthur, glumly. "There are those remains, and that fellow Johnstone, and all that yarn. It's the very devil."

"So is she," replied Hugh. "Pity we didn't push her overboard when she brought us home!"

"What are we going to do about it?" was his next query. "Kick Desmond? Whip Teresa? Get damages out of someone—what?"

"Drown ourselves, I should think," said the gloomy Arthur; and once more silence reigned.

"Does Gran know?"

"I believe she has known all the time."

Hugh whistled. This indeed was a new idea.

Arthur's distress would have been even heavier had he known how Kythe was meeting the trouble. Her youth and inexperience naturally made the shock greater.

Flung in a corner of the big sofa in the playroom she lay without sign of life or consciousness until a noisy incursion of Lance and Guin, to fetch her over to see the Tower room, roused her to a vivid realisation of the position.

These two, these cheery friends and playmates, they were her half-brother and sister. She looked at them with new eyes. Teresa's vicious words came back and her gaze sought Guin's hands—capable, strong-fingered square-tipped and clean-skinned. There *was* a likeness . . . and in horror she looked into Guin's face to see whether there was any other likeness.

Was it Lennox, or Hubert, she was like?

"What in the world is the matter?"

They stood, arrested by her ghastly face.

Then she cried. Cried stormily, unrestrainedly, at the end of her resources. She had no strength left for control or reticence. May came, and Hero came, and finally Mr. Desmond came, and through the garden came Mr. and Mrs. Raymond, to see if anyone would come home to dinner with them. But their presence made no difference. She cried on,

"She is hysterical," said Aunt Hermione, at last. "Really, David, I think she would be the better for a shake!"

"Come, Kythe," said Mr. Desmond, not unkindly, "what is the trouble? Don't you think you could tell us?"

And he laid a firm hand on her shoulder, giving her ever such a mild shake, though not in any way in rebuke. Indeed, he was sorely troubled himself, guessing at something of the cause of her outbreak. He knew little of his youngest daughter's strange nature. Her dislike of him had been cordially reciprocated. He resented her existence, her critical, condemning eyes, her aloof and alien ways; and most of all he resented that she should be the one to have discovered part of his secret. But he could not be deaf and blind to her distress, and take no part in such a scene in his own house and family.

Blind passion seized on Kythe, at his touch. She flung his hand furiously from her, shrinking into the corner of the sofa, gasping with sobs, trembling and quivering, but fighting for breath to tell him, to tell them, to tell everybody . . .

"It is him," she cried. "Him; how dare he touch me? Aunt Hermie, where is Guin? Guin? Lance?"

The two had gone outside, to leave their elders in control of the situation. They came back on hearing her call.

"Lance," cried Kythe, struggling to calm her voice. "Didn't you say that your mother said Guin had hands like your father?"

"Yes," answered Lance, curtly. He was taken aback.

"Hold out your hands, Guin."

She could not prevent her voice quavering into a falsetto.

Puzzled, Guin held her hands out, looking from them to Kythe, and then Mr. Desmond, all at sea.

"Look at them," said Kythe, hysterically, her voice trembling and breaking again. "And look at his."

She seized her father's wrist and put the two hands together, looking round at them all defiantly.

A dark flush spread over Mr. Desmond's face. Of all things, somehow, he had least expected this. Strangely enough, he did not look at any of his own family, but at the boy whose wide, grave eyes showed that he had grasped the idea so crudely presented to him, and understood.

It was Mr. Raymond who cut the dreadful scene short.

"Take David into the study," he said, low and stern, to his wife. "Lance, will you take your sister home, and give me your word not to speak about this until I come over and see you?"

Lance hesitated, then beckoned with his head and chin to Guin, who, hopelessly bewildered, went away with him.

"Go to your mother, girls," said Mr. Raymond "and see that you don't say anything to worry her. Now, Kythe, tell me what made you do this wicked, this abominable thing."

He sat beside her, angling for her confidence, in vain, for some time. Until some chance word touched her sore heart, and melted a little of the icy anger she felt towards all of them.

"It was Mrs. Gervase told it," she said, so suddenly that he was startled. "You don't know, but Father knows, that I know——"

She broke off, and he waited.

"Father knows that Major Gervase wants to marry me. We were in the garden, near the door in the wall, and we heard Father come in. He was out, meeting Mrs. Gervase. He was angry, and we came in with him, and he and Major Gervase quarrelled. That was the night mother was ill.

"To-day I was sitting with Major Gervase, and she —Guin's mother—heard us say she would soon be gone, because Lady Katherine would not have her. Then she told us—about Guin's hands, and who her father was; and I was ill. I'll kill Father if he ever touches me . . . touches me again. He was with her all those years.

"He was with her all those years, and then came back; came back to us and to mother, and to live here! I hate him, so that I want to kill him. It is no use telling me it is wicked; I don't care, I can never be so wicked as he is."

In ungirl-like quiet, with a vindictiveness in odd contrast to her violent tears, and so bitter and cold-drawn that the Rector felt chilled, she brought out her tale unadorned. Each phrase of it astounded him

more and more. The knowledge that this child had a serious love affair with Major Gervase, struck him dumb.

Enjoining her to wait until he came for her, the Rector went to find his brother-in-law.

"Have you anything to tell us, David? Can't you tell us, now that this has been burst on us, something that will make it less dreadful?"

Mr. Desmond lifted a hunted face.

"Is there anything more for you to know?"

"Oh, yes, David," cried his sister. "Yes. Yes. I have known you all your life; we were in the nursery together, you and I and Harry, and nothing can wipe out that. There is no knowledge like that knowledge; and I know—yes, I have been furious with you, and I have condemned you, and been ashamed about you; but now that I hear this terrible thing, I *know* that it was not all your doing. There *is* something you could say, something we would all believe, that would make it better. Or, at least, not so utterly awful. I do believe that, David; and so does Charlie; and you know—we can't tell you half so well as you know—that Honoria would believe it without being told! Tell us, David. We have earned the right to know, with all this sorrow."

Mr. Desmond sat, on his desk chair, leaning forward with one arm over his knee, looking into vacancy, one hand feeling for the scar among his thick shock of hair. There was something faintly pathetic about the seeking fingers. He was vaguely conscious of his sister's words, but the pattern of the carpet was more

vivid to him than her appeal. There was something like a film panorama, that seemed to be passing before him over that pattern of the carpet—a panorama of the strange things his memory contained. When he lifted his eyes, with an effort, and wrenched his mind back to his sister, he could not remember what in the world it was she had said to him.

"Oh. Ah, yes," he murmured, absently. "Of course. I beg your pardon, Hermie. What were you saying?"

And he got up and walked to the window.

There it was. The garden with the fatal door, out of which he had gone to his doom. The years that the locust had eaten, the hard, secret years of banishment and toil, the personal degradation, the loss, the tangling intrigue—it began and ended with that door, out of which he had stepped so harmlessly, in at which he had entered to find his daughter in the arms of Teresa's brother. He lost himself in the mazes of the disaster which had overtaken him.

He turned with a start, to see Mrs. Raymond crying, and her husband trying to soothe her. She cried bitterly and hopelessly; and Raymond cast a glance, the reverse of friendly, at his brother-in-law. Desmond left the window.

"If you are willing," he said, still with that mazed and speculative look on him, "I will come home with you now, if you will give me some dinner, and tell you how it was. Wait a minute, will you, while I go and tell Honoria. Don't cry, Hermie."

He seemed to brush something away from before

his face, as he went, rather blindly, towards the door.

Raymond watched him go, and urged his wife to keep herself in hand. Now that the shameful tale—so much more shameful than they had thought—was to be told, he felt a strong reluctance to hear it, or to look his old friend in the face while he told it.

As Desmond came down the stairs again, Mr. Raymond remembered that he had told Kythe to wait for him.

"One minute!" he called to Desmond, and hurried down to the playroom.

The room was empty and Kythe nowhere to be found.

CHAPTER XVI

EXPLORERS AND EXCAVATORS

LANCE took his astonished little sister away, gripping her arm as if he were saving her from some great danger. He was not shocked, only troubled. The revelation was the kind of thing he knew, instinctively as well as out of past experience, might be expected of the evil woman who was their mother. Of Mr. Desmond he had never had much opinion, having unconsciously imbibed the view prevailing about him among his own children.

It had not yet struck him that those children were his half-brothers and sisters. His mind had not travelled further than his relation to their father, and that father's shameful relation to his mother. A furious anger surged in him that his mother had given him this man of all men for a father.

Lance did not want Guin to think about it at all. At the great day-school for which Fairlands was famous, he was known as Daddy, because of his unfaltering care for his sister. He called for her every day, and if not able to take her home, saw her go in the company of some other girl or girls. No boyish preoccupations had ever come between them; and he

was strong enough, and intellectually independent enough to hold his views, stand up for them, and make them respected.

All the Desmond and Gervase boys went to that school. They had jointly established a great record there. All the girls went to the "Lodgeries," as Fairlands Lodge girls' school was called. It had fine traditions also, and the Desmond girls had added to its roll of honour. It was there also that Teresa had distinguished herself in her own peculiar way.

Lance felt a raging anger, with his mother, Desmond, and Kythe. Poor little Guin—how scared and puzzled she looked! His boy's nature did not allow of his gauging the torment of soul Kythe had gone through; without an ounce of sympathy, he called her, in his mind, a little devil, and thought she was just a right daughter for Mr. Desmond.

"I hope she'll rub it into *him*, anyhow!" he thought, in angry consolation.

Lance was full of the liveliest excitement about having the Tower room for their own; and it was to that haven he escorted Guin, as the likeliest spot in which to distract her thoughts from the row that Kythe had made. They were still altering and decorating it, a task at which Guin's manual dexterity was of value; and they had dragged Gervase out again and again to make him admire, instruct, or advise. It was to please their fastidious taste that he had ordered the removal of the ugly grate which had been good enough for Uncle Hugh; but they were not satisfied yet.

"Let's go and finish the grate," said Lance insinu-

atingly; and Guin responded handsomely, getting her hand into his and making him run to the garden door.

They had filled in the fireplace with bricks and tiles "lifted" from the stable and the greenhouses; but there was still a something lacking.

Then Guin, forgetting her over-discussed hands and her dear friend's queer behaviour, and the general "beastliness" of everything, had an inspiration.

"Lance! Two of those lovely paving blocks from the cellar. Could we get them up, do you think? They would just do!"

Down they went to prospect. They had already removed a slab thence to make into a hearthstone. It had the Gervase arms on it and belonged to the cellar threshold. Adams had raised a storm about its removal and threatened to tell Lady Katherine.

"We can take them from that corner, in the angle," she whispered, full of excitement. "Then we can pile in rubbish and stuff and no one will see, so there won't be a row like there was over the other one."

So they betook themselves to the task, with various implements of vandalism, and toiled with a vigour worthy of a better cause at the solid floor.

Lance succeeded in prizing up, with heated, struggling energy, one stone of unsuspected dimensions so far as depth was concerned; and was proceeding with the far easier task of dislodging its already loosened neighbour, when Guin said, with intense emphasis,

"Look here, Lance!"

The solid masonry of the massive walls was handsomely interrupted at intervals by strips of heavy

woodwork elaborately if roughly carven. These lines of carving reached up into the darkness to the roof of the cellar.

"Couldn't we get this off and put it in our room?" she asked. "Then it could be seen. There are all sorts of jolly things on it—here are some of our oak-leaves, and here is the crown and the helmet; and there are some lions and things besides."

She traced the designs with her deft fingers.

"Acorns, as well as oak-leaves," she continued. "Lance, they *are* jolly!"

"How is it fastened on?" asked Lance, peering at the solid structure, and leaving the stones with some relief.

Guin felt along one strip, he peered along another. "I can't see how it is fastened," he grumbled.

"Have you your knife?" asked Guin, after a moment's silence. Her attention was concentrated on something she had found in the carving.

Lance produced a complicated arrangement of many devices, from which she selected a sharp-pointed punch. With it she extracted from a leaf which she had been touching with her clever finger-tips, a shaped piece of cork. The space from which she slipped it out was a keyhole.

"I could *feel* it had been picked out before," she exclaimed gleefully; "and that it was different from the wood. I wonder where its key is?"

The flags were returned to their place with desperate haste, and dusted over with rubbish to hide all signs of depredation. Then Lance started for the smithy,

whence he returned with a powerful picklock, which the amused functionary there presiding selected and committed to his care.

The lock resisted their unskilled attack for a long time; then suddenly and unaccountably yielded. It had apparently been well oiled at no very distant date, and turned easily and noiselessly. A door opened two or three inches, parting all down the middle of one strip of carving.

A vigorous push sent it slowly swinging back, and a gush of stale air came out, making them shrink and retreat. There was a dark void before them, full of mysterious possibilities.

"Golly!" said Lance. "We have found it this time!"

Some of the newspaper in which their possessions had been wrapped was produced from the room upstairs, and twisted into torches to test the air. The unmatchable joy of the explorer and adventurer was theirs, with the added delight of freedom from the supervision of grown-ups.

The paper torches burned flickeringly and revealed three deep steps into an irregularly-shaped room, with a door at the further end. There was a table, some books, crockery, chairs, camp-bed and rugs, and odd litter. It had plainly been lived in. A good deal of usable stuff, in the shape of candles, a paraffin lamp, matches, soap, and towels, rugs and pillows, lay about in untidy confusion. Two of the candles they lit at once.

They tip-toed about, frightened as well as excited.

At any moment some occupant of the room might appear and demand their right to intrude. Lance took the precaution of pushing the door back to its widest limit and weighting it with one of the heavy chairs, besides putting a large log of wood where it would prevent the door from shutting-to if slammed.

"It wouldn't do to get trapped here," he remarked.

Then they opened the further door. It gave on to a short flight of steps.

Lighting paper torches, and holding their flame downwards until they flared, they advanced step by step. Lance's torch burnt low, and he paused to flare it up again. Guin went down two or three more steps.

Lance raised his torch again; and found himself looking into the terrified face of his sister.

"Lance! Lance!"

She was gasping, pressing him back. They fled up the steps to the room they had left. Guin shut the door behind them and jammed a chair against it. Lance clutched one of her arms and looked in her face in silent query.

"It's dead," she whispered, hoarsely. "A woman. Dead. Lying there——"

Feverishly they removed the log from the outer doorway and dragged the door after them, after trampling out their torches and extinguishing some of the candles. With beating hearts they repaired to the garden, and took stock of the situation.

"Tell Uncle Arthur," was the unanimous decision.

Gervase, coming into his room to dress for dinner, found it in possession. Astride of the bed-rail sat

Lance, with face rather whiter than usual; and leaning against him holding on to his jacket was a very washed-out version of Guin. They started up with the utmost relief, and shouted a welcome that was more tearful than gay.

"What's up?" asked Gervase, noting the signs of emotion at a glance.

"A dead woman? How did you know she was dead?" he asked abruptly, when the startling tale had been blurted out. The first thing that occurred to him was that the woman might possibly be saved.

"She was—it was—there was bones," faltered Guin, who had never had harder work not to cry. Lance kept tight hold of her arm, and pinched it to agony in his attempts to be comforting. He, too, was afraid of her crying, because he might have followed suit.

Gervase refrained from further questions, seeing the state they were in. Possessing himself of the implement with which the lock had been turned, the piece of cork that Guin had extracted from the keyhole, and enough information to locate the secret door, he rang to hurry dinner on, sent a message to Lady Katherine, and arranged for one of the maids, who was a friendly and reliable creature, to bring her sewing to the window-place outside the children's bedrooms so that they should not be alone. This gave them great comfort, though neither of them would have condescended to mention it.

After rushing through his dinner, Gervase went to the police-station. There he found, unexpectedly, Amos Johnstone and Mr. Talbot.

A stiff greeting was exchanged, and Gervase noticed the hectic excitement of little Amos. His shrivelled face was flaming.

"Thomas," said Gervase, ostentatiously avoiding intercourse with Mr. Talbot, "I want you to come with me to The Domain. A discovery has been made there by my nephew and niece that will have to be investigated, and I do not think we had better lose any time."

Thomas was not minded to bandy words with the young Squire, and obediently proceeded to put on his helmet and arm himself with note-book, handcuffs, and other paraphernalia of his office. But when he looked deprecatingly at Mr. Talbot that gentleman intervened.

"I think Major Gervase had better know what has happened," he observed. "I do not know the nature of *your* discovery, Major Gervase, but a discovery has also been made at the Homestead Farm this afternoon. Johnstone has had men at work there for some days, clearing and searching. To-day they found some keys—one a large key with the helmet and crown of the Gervases—which nobody in this place could fail to recognise as similar to the collection of antique keys at The Domain. I think you will see how greatly that increases Amos Johnstone's supposition that the murder of the unknown man, and the disappearance of his son, have some connection with your—er—family's affairs."

The slow, painstaking, courteous statement found its way to the recesses of Gervase's understanding. He could not fail to recognise the stern threat behind Mr.

Talbot's irreproachable manner, nor to see how damningly significant the find was. And there was the body found by the children!

Lance had said the lock he picked had been oiled, quite recently. By whom—Teresa? Obviously. It hit him in the face, now he thought of it. The key to the secret door would no doubt be in her possession.

What share had that evil woman in the death of these two people, the man found buried at the Homestead Farm, and the woman lying unburied in the underground room?

CHAPTER XVII

WILLIE JOHNSTONE

GERVASE stared stupidly at Mr. Talbot. The words and ideas ran round and round in a meaningless hunt after each other. He felt dizzy.

Then he heard Mr. Talbot say, more kindly,

"Sit down a minute. Don't try to talk," and he subsided into a chair and drank some cold water.

"You had better come with us," he said to Mr. Talbot, when he had recovered. "The children—poor little beggars, they are sick with fright—have found the body of a woman in the cellar of the Old Tower."

He made no objection to Amos Johnstone accompanying them. The little man trotted behind with Constable Thomas, stumbling with excitement; while Gervase and Talbot walked ahead with hurrying strides. As they went, Gervase gave the magistrate all the information he possessed, which was little.

The cellar door opened easily, the lock being of the very simplest construction; and with a good supply of lights, they entered the room and opened the further door.

At the foot of twelve steps, stretched lengthways beside the wall, lay the skeleton of which Guin had

caught sight. There were tattered remains of female clothing looking like a skirt and an evening cloak. There were no boots; the bones of the feet, fallen to pieces, lay uncovered. The skull had rolled a little apart from the neck.

"What a gruesome sight," said Mr. Talbot. "That poor little girl—shocking for her, Gervase."

"Dreadful," exclaimed Gervase. "And she looked most awfully broken up."

They found themselves getting quite friendly again.

The stair led, as Gervase anticipated, to a long passage, paved and masoned, that rose and dipped and turned and twisted, and ended in a frowning door. The door had on its carven panels the Gervase insignia—helmet, crown, and oak-leaves.

"Archæologically," said Mr. Talbot, "an enchanting discovery; but I am afraid, Gervase, this will spell serious trouble."

"I suppose so," said Gervase, gloomily. "Well, it has got to be faced now. I wonder where this comes out——"

"That key, sir," observed Constable Thomas, "the one found at the Homestead; it might fit one of these doors—this one or the one further back."

The clothes, fragments of which were examined, must have been of rich and handsome texture. A circumstance that Constable Thomas noticed, with trained acuteness, was curious. They were not fastened, in any place, by the hooks or buttons with which they were furnished.

"All unfastened," he noted carefully.

He also noted something else.

There was no female underclothing. The corpse had been wearing a man's vest and pants.

In the underground room, close to the cellar entrance, was found a heavy iron bar, that looked as if it had been wrenched from a furnace. It was thickly rusted. And in a corner made by the angle of the three steps, lay a hammer, thick with dust and fluff.

Careful note was made of the position of the corpse, its surroundings, and the contents of the room. The remains, wrapped in blankets, were removed to the workhouse infirmary, where Dr. Willett hurried with eager curiosity, the moment information was got through to him. The remnants of clothing were collected for close examination.

Mr. Talbot gave some instruction in an undertone to Constable Thomas, and then, without invitation, accompanied Gervase home. He sat till late, Gervase getting more and more surprised at the visitation.

"I told Thomas to bring the result of the investigation here," remarked Mr. Talbot, looking at his watch. "You don't mind my staying, do you? Of course there will only be a superficial examination; but there might be something we ought to talk over."

Suddenly Gervase understood. He turned his flushed face to the shadow and cursed Teresa deep, if not loud.

That disturbing soul had lurked about furtively all the evening, for some purpose of her own, plainly illicit. She had seen the expedition to the cellar and

the removal of the body; and she sped, cat-like, up the lane.

No sound broke the silence. There were no footsteps save her own in the lane, no voices the other side of the wall.

In growing audacity, she went to the front door.

Mr. Desmond was not at home. He was dining at the Rectory.

To the Rectory she went.

Mr. Desmond came out to the door. She spoke, rapid and low, giving him the news.

In silence he stared at her and heard her to the end. Then he drew himself up and took a deep breath.

"You have done your worst," he said, curtly. "Do the rest; it will be better than this. It is out of your hands now."

Mrs. Raymond, coming out to ask whether his caller would not come in for a moment, heard him say it. She thought he said it almost triumphantly. He shut out Teresa's evil smile with a slam of the door, and led his sister back to the sitting-room.

Teresa took herself home, hardly knowing whether she felt angry or interested. It was a good game. Exciting. It had reached a critical point.

She joined her brother and Talbot in the smoking-room, without any sort of embarrassment. Smoking her little Spanish cigars, drinking bigger tots of whisky than either of the men, telling amazing tales of audacious doings in phrases more audacious still, she lounged on the sofa with one foot thrown over the arm, her

head back, her wide happy smile and beautiful teeth in astonishing contrast to her manner and speech. Mr. Talbot thought many things, none of which he said. Gervase felt sick with shame and anger.

The séance was broken by the arrival of Dr. Willett and Constable Thomas, the last-named breathing hard and standing with his helmet in his hand near the door.

Teresa half rose, a sudden feeling of uneasiness coming over her.

Gervase rose; so did Mr. Talbot.

"I am afraid our errand is a most unpleasant one, Gervase," said Dr. Willett, gravely. "The body found in your Tower premises is that of a man, not a woman; and Amos Johnstone identifies it as his missing son."

"Dear, dear," exclaimed Mr. Talbot. "That is tragic, is it not? Yet it is what we have all anticipated in a way, I am afraid. I confess I could not make out what *woman* it could possibly be. Will you ask your sister, Major Gervase, to give us some explanation of this sad business?"

They all turned to Teresa.

"*I* have nothing to tell!" answered Teresa, lightly. "What has it got to do with me?"

"A good deal, I am afraid, if what the man's father says is true. Come, Mrs. Gervase, do you not think you had better be frank with us?"

Teresa broke into a peal of insolent laughter.

"*Frank;* with you, you poor innocents? What a delicious proposition."

"Then I am afraid we have no alternative but to place you under detention."

"Me?"

Her astonishment and dismay were so unaffected as to be almost comic. The position was one for which she was palpably so unprepared, that they did not need any assurance of her sincerity. She was utterly nonplussed, and they saw it.

"I do not want to take Mrs. Gervase to—away," began Mr. Talbot to Gervase; "but I must have some arrangement made which will ensure that she does not—er—evade the enquiry——"

"Send for Mr. Desmond," broke in Teresa, curtly.

"Mr. Desmond!"

They were all taken aback now. This was a complication indeed. And the first thought that came most unwelcomely, into Mr. Talbot's mind, was, what a triumph for Lord Gotto!

"Mr. Desmond is dining at the Rectory," she continued. Her wits never played her false and she saw her danger, acting promptly and shrewdly. Get in her accusation first, or she would be "in the soup."

And so it fell out that there was another ring at the Rectory bell, and another caller for Mr. Desmond. This one came into the house, and appeared, without being announced, at the drawing-room door.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Desmond, sir," said the officer, "and yours, sir," to the Rector, "and your lady's. You are wanted, sir, if you would be good enough to step over, at The Domain. Mr. Talbot has asked me to come over to fetch you, sir."

"Suppose I can't come," said Mr. Desmond, resentfully.

Constable Thomas coughed behind his hand and looked uncomfortable.

"I wouldn't say that, sir, if I was you. Reely, I wouldn't. They wouldn't a-sent me, sir, not without good reason. Can you get your coatanat, sir, without going upstairs? I think as how you'd better, not meaning any offence, sir, nor yet to the Rector. You understand that dooty, it's dooty; and that's what it is, so to speak."

"Will you go up to the house, Hermie, and tell Honoria, if it becomes necessary?"

His voice was hard and had that quality, that of late had died out, of brutal, unsparing authority.

He put on hat and coat, and went with Thomas without another word. The Rector escorted his wife to The Meadows, then started for The Domain, as fast as his feet would take him.

It was a strange scene on which he entered. His arrival was hardly noticed; Gervase gave him a brief glance and a nod; Constable Thomas moved aside to let him pass. Desmond, Talbot, and Teresa spared him no attention at all.

The sofa made a sort of barrier, sideways, before the fireplace and hearth. Talbot, standing with his back to the hearth, pipe in hand; Dr. Willett, his hand on Gervase's arm, holding him back; Constable Thomas guarding the door, and Desmond, a little ahead of him, the further side of the sofa; all had their eyes fixed on Teresa. With one foot on the sofa, she pointed at Mr. Desmond with her supple, dramatic fingers,

hurling at him the charge she had so long held over his head.

"Why else do you suppose he 'disappeared'?" she asked, in the tone of one who at the same time supplies the answer.

"There seems to be a slight absence of motive," suggested Mr. Talbot, mildly.

"Motive? He was jealous of the market-gardener boy. Not without some—though not sufficient—reason. If you remember, Arthur, it was because of a market man that I was expelled from school."

An expression that broke from Dr. Willett made her turn to him with an evil smile.

"Just a minute ago you were asking for frankness," she gibed. "Do you like it?"

"Aren't you going to say anything, Desmond?" asked Gervase. "Of the two, if it is any good to you to know my opinion, she is more likely to have done it than you."

"Oh, I have killed men, in my time," said Desmond. "But not that poor lad. At least—perhaps that is hardly true. Have you found any marks of violence?"

"No," said Dr. Willett. "But he might have been stabbed, strangled, poisoned——"

"He died of fright," said Desmond.

CHAPTER XVIII

BROTHERS AND SISTERS

When Mr. Raymond left Kythe in the playroom, she lay for a few moments with closed eyes and aching head, hardly conscious of anything but misery. And when she heard sounds which suggested that he might be returning, she got herself out of the low window and down the garden.

It was beginning to dawn on her how savage had been her treatment of Guin and Lance. True, they were not sensitive on the subject of parents; yet it was a dreadful thing to have done to them.

That was the worst of having a man like that for a father. It drove one to do terrible things, to think them, to feel them. What would Major Gervase say, when he heard?

She could not bear to think of that. She had a dragging fear at her heart that she would not see Gervase again; and she dared not face such a possibility. The impulse was on her to seek out Lance and Guin and beg their pardon for her attack on her father through them. At the same time it would give her a chance of seeing Gervase.

Peeping in at The Domain garden door, she saw

Lance and Guin go down to the cellar; and seized with an access of shyness, refrained from calling to them. Then she crept up the stair to their room to wait for them.

She heard them in the cellar, stumble and run, and scamper up the stairs. She heard them slam the outside door, turning the key; and then race away into the garden. No notion of what had happened dawned on her, of course, and it was a minute or two before she realised that she was locked in.

That did not give her much uneasiness either. She was pretty certain they would come back. She curled herself up on the spacious sofa and nursed her woe; and tears came again blindingly and sorely, making her throat ache and her eyes burn. And after sobbing and crying hopelessly for nearly an hour, she slept from sheer exhaustion.

She did not hear Gervase come with Mr. Talbot and Constable Thomas. The sounds made in the removal of the remains did not fall on any waking sense. She slept until one in the morning, and woke, bewildered, stiff and terrified.

Her terror was the greater when she remembered where she was; at first she could not think. The chiming of the old clock, the rumbling of the market-carts and the tlip-tlop of the hoofs of the plodding horses, seemed as if they would go on, had gone on, for ever. After hours of sheer fright, made worse by a torturing thirst which she dared not move to slake, she heard the men moving in the garden.

Again, she was too shy to call out, and waited in the

hope of hearing the downstairs door opened. She tiptoed about the room in the early sunshine, washed and tidied herself at the corner washstand; and ate a piece of cake she found in the cupboard near it, mixed up with the soap and Lance's tools. By and by she fell asleep again on the sofa, and woke up to find Lance staring at her.

"What in the world are you doing here?" asked Lance, not very genially. "Your people are in an awful state. They think *you* have disappeared!"

"I wish I could," said Kythe, dismally.

"How did you get in?" asked Lance, concentrating on the practical side.

"Last night, while you and Guin were down the cellar."

"Have you been here all night?" with incredulity.

Kythe nodded.

Lance was speechless. All night, alone, in the place where a body was found—how utterly awful.

"Didn't you hear us run away?"

Kythe nodded again.

"Did you hear the men come?"

"No. What for?"

Lance was silent. He simply could not tell her.

"I wanted to tell you and Guin I was sorry, Lance. I couldn't go to bed——"

She broke down and had hard work not to start crying again.

"Oh, rot," said Lance, very uncomfortable. "Never mind that. We didn't mind—at least, Guin didn't.

What in the world made you go and do it, Ky? I should never have thought it of you."

"Nor me," whispered Kythe, nearly weeping. "I *was* a beast, Lance; I don't know what made me. It's *him*. He makes me want to do all sorts of things—awful things. And there's a lot more you don't know—it's been going on and going on—I wish I were dead."

Lance put an arm round her shoulders.

"Never mind, Ky. Don't cry. We are all right; it shan't make any difference. But I say? You ought not talk of *him* like that, now. Don't kick a fellow when he's down, you know."

"What is the matter with him? Is he dying?"

There was almost eagerness in her voice.

"No," said Lance, soberly. "Perhaps he wishes he were. He's in prison, Ky. They say he murdered a man, who was found, here, last night. Guin and I found him. She did. She thought it was a woman."

He was whispering now, and she was holding tightly to his arm and jacket.

"Here? Here, where I slept? Let's get out, Lance. Oh, let us get out. Come away; don't let us stay here. Oh, Lance!"

"No, I won't go home," she said, outside. "I am afraid I'll be glad. Mayn't I come and have breakfast with you?"

Adams went round to The Meadows to say Miss Kythe was having breakfast at The Domain. It did not occur to either of them that they would do better,

in the present state of things, to keep apart; and the effect of the information on her family at The Meadows was mercifully veiled from them.

In the porch, at the side entrance, they paused. Kythe felt shy and awkward.

"Will Guin be cross?" she said.

"Not she," said Lance. "I say, Kythe. What made you—how did you think of it?"

"Your mother told me."

"My mother?" with profound amazement.

"Yes. It is true, isn't it?"

"*I* don't know! Why should it be?" with angry protest against his own conviction that it *was* true. "But when did she tell you? What for?"

"She was in a fearful temper. Arthur and I were in your room——"

It was the first time she had used Gervase's Christian name in speaking of him, and it made Lance stare harder.

"Uncle Arthur? Well, what was she in a temper about?"

"We were talking of her, and saying she was to be made to go. Lady Katherine says she is not to stay; and she was listening and heard us. And she went for us, and said it all—awful things, about Guin's hands, and hanging pictures—and having hold on us—Lance! Will it prevent Arthur and me being married, you and Guin and me being sort of brother and sisters?"

"What's that?" asked Lance, sharply. "Married to who?"

"To me—to him—us. We want to."

"Rot." His incredulous scorn was very emphatic.

"It's not rot. It's true. You ask him, if you like. He came and told my father; and Father burst out crying and it was dreadful——"

Teresa's voice sounded near at hand, and they stopped talking and hurried in.

Guin received the visitor rather shyly, though cordially; and presently a messenger came to say that they were none of them to go to school that day, and that Kythe was to go back to The Meadows at once.

Gervase joined her in the garden.

"I will see you home, Kythe," he said. "All right, Lance; you can go."

Lance watched them go, with varying emotions. Of which surprise was the greatest.

Silently, Kythe went with her lover.

In The Meadows garden, among the rose bushes, he took her in his arms.

"This is the last time, Kythe," he said. "There is no way out of it, and we must give it up. You see that, don't you?"

"Will you tell me what happened—about my father?" asked Kythe, fighting for time; time in which to think of some plea that would move him.

"Guin and Lance found a secret door in the cellar last night. There was a dead man—a skeleton—in the passage, and it was poor Willie Johnstone. My sister, Lance and Guin's mother—do you understand, Kythe? They are your half-brother and sister, she is their mother and your father is their father—she gave in-

formation to the police that your father committed the murder out of jealousy, and that was why he went away. And the green baize apron he was wearing when he was last seen—the remains of it have been found alongside Johnstone's body."

Horror at Teresa's wickedness and treachery kept her silent for a moment. Swiftly came another devastating thought.

"Will my father be hanged?"

That would indeed be her mother's death sentence!

"My dear, I do not know what will happen. I do not think he did it, but he cannot bring any witnesses to prove him innocent—it is a bad business—Kythe, don't be hard on him. He is in a terrible position, and she has been pursuing him for years. She has hunted him from place to place and country to country—what a fiend she is!"

"*She* ought to be the one hanged," said Kythe, savagely. "But why can we not wait, Arthur? We are not real relations—why should it separate us?"

"There is no real *why,* except that it *must,*" he answered, forcing himself to be brutal, as the only possible way. "I cannot go on with it, Kythe. It would not be decent. It is utterly impossible."

Kythe looked at him blankly. She was not wanting in pride; and as she looked, the situation seemed to change in aspect.

"Very well," she replied, with amazing dignity and self-control. "That is what is called jilting, isn't it? You are right in saying it would not be decent. It is not decent to want to marry a man who doesn't

want to. And if you cannot face the first trouble that comes, you are not fit for me to want. I am sorry I have allowed you to kiss me."

She walked away from him without another word of farewell, ignoring his "good-bye, darling." In her breast was a raging anger, embracing Gervase, her father, and all men. Curs, she called them; and said it over and over. How happy they had been, without Father, and when Lennox was away, and before Gervase came to live! She, at any rate, would never be happy again.

And now her father was in prison. More wretchedness and trouble for mother! And what for the man who was the cause of it? Gervase's words came back to her—"she has been pursuing him for years. She has hunted him from place to place and from country to country"—and it sounded more terrible even than the death sentence of which he stood in danger now.

Something of her father's burden of wretchedness came home to her understanding. The wrenching sobs she had seen wrung from him, the breaking-down of his fortitude, the failure of his armour of hard insensibility, began to have more and more meaning, more reality than Gervase's kisses, more poignancy than her own distress. They clutched at her heart and turned her anger to tears, and sent her flying to her mother in a passion of pity and self-reproach, in which her own wild sorrow for the moment was swamped.

Lance was beginning to recover his nerve; and not being allowed to go to school, nor to play in the Old Tower, which was sealed up until the enquiry should

be over, his natural interest in the event in which he and Guin had played so important a part came buoyantly to the surface. He pumped information out of the servants, the tradesmen, the postman, and all other chance callers, even "trying it on" with Constable Thomas. Finally, he had an *éclaircissement* with his uncle.

It was at tea-time. A tray was taken into the library for Gervase, who came in looking tired and harassed.

"May we come in, Uncle Arthur?"

They did so without further permission.

"Uncle Arthur," Lance began, dropping on to the rug and pulling Guin down beside him, "we want to know all about it."

"All about what?"

"What is happening; to my mother, and—father."

Gervase looked at him in dismay.

"I'm afraid I can't discuss it, Lance, old chap. It is not a story to tell children——"

"We knew you would say that," interrupted Guin, "but it is not fair. We were the people who found the—man dead, and it's our father and mother. We want to know. It is more our business than anyone else's. We don't want to grow up, to be told things all wrong years after it happened, by people who've half-forgotten or never knew properly——"

She broke off, flushed and excited, remembering how in days gone by they had often listened, with more or less of interest, when grown-up people tried to

fashion a tale out of the past. The corners never fitted, she used to say to Lance.

"We know too much," said Lance, wisely, "not to be told more. Mr. Desmond's our father as well as Kythe's. It's horrible, and we hate it; but we know it, and it is no use hating it. You none of you can prevent it. Is he going to be tried for bigamy as well, or doesn't that matter? And why is that woman in Mother's room? You *ought* to tell us, Uncle Arthur."

Thus adjured, Gervase endeavoured to meet the situation.

"Mr. Desmond is arrested under a warrant for the murder of Willie Johnstone, son of old Amos," he began, evading the question of bigamy. "It was his body you found. Your mother is under detention and will probably be taken to prison to-night, charged as an accessory or an accomplice or something. The clothes on the body were her clothes. Mr. Desmond says the man died of fright."

He stopped, arrested by a sudden movement of Lance's.

"Mother's clothes? That's rummy. Uncle Arthur, I remember Mother showing a man a jacket and trousers and things, and saying they came off a corpse. I remember, because I was frightened at night, sleeping in the room where they were in the cupboard."

"For heaven's sake," cried Gervase, "don't you say a word about that!"

It would be the last straw if these unfortunate children were to be put in the witness-box to help rivet

the guilt of this matter on their father and mother. In any case, he was afraid he would not be able to prevent Guin being called, as to the finding of the body, at the inquest which was to open next day. What toils they were taken in! And there was the terrible task before him of telling Lady Katherine. So far she knew nothing; but it could not be kept from her longer.

He admonished the children sternly to keep silence about their mother's affairs and then dragged his reluctant steps to Lady Katherine's room.

Lady Katherine was sitting up, looking more herself; and Gervase felt savage when he thought of the story he had to tell, which would probably throw her back again to the pitiable weakness from which she had revived.

He kissed her and pulled up a chair.

"You will want all your strength, Gran. A shocking thing has happened; the worst that has come on us yet."

And he told her, from first to last, she listening with never a word.

She lay back, when the recital ended, her lips moving silently, her hands working. Then she collected herself.

"At last; it has come at last," she said, hoarsely. "What has Mr. Desmond said?"

"Nothing yet, except that Johnstone died of fright."

"Will you see his solicitor, and ask him to come and see me? Who is acting for him?"

"His own man of business, I think. Raymond wired him first thing this morning."

"I do not know whether what I have to say is any use; but it had better be said."

After a brief reflection, she added,

"You spoke of marrying one of the Desmond girls, my boy. You realise now, do you not, how utterly impossible it would be?"

"Yes," he answered, in a husky voice. "I told her so."

It cost him a terrible effort to speak of Kythe. He longed for her, now he had cut himself off from her, in a way he was finding it hard to combat. It would mean, in the end, that he would have to leave The Domain.

Everything he cared for, swept away from him by the disgraceful Teresa and her intrigues, in which he had no part! His soul rose up in revolt. Why should he sacrifice his life and his love——

"Tell him to see me to-morrow without fail," Lady Katherine was saying.

The key of the door in the cellar was found among Teresa's things well oiled and in good condition. It matched the keys found by Farmer Johnstone's men, and there was little doubt that those two belonged to the doors of the long passage. So rusted were they, however, that they could not be used without breaking the wards; and the heavy carved door at which the investigation stopped was opened by other means.

The exit was a stone slab, that opened on a hinge, and that fastened with enormous iron bolts. The stone, lifted, proved to be the inner threshold of one of the ramshackle sheds near the manure-heaps in the

Homestead Farm, hard by where Farmer Johnstone's men were searching and digging.

The stone was so large, the bolts and hinges so stiff that the strength of two or three men was required to lift it. Even if in good repair, well oiled, it would be a task for a man. Teresa, for instance, could never have used that exit unaided.

This discovery, added to the other, was naturally the main topic of conversation in Lower Domain that day. At Tenterley's, at The Blue-nosed Man, and wherever people foregathered, it was discussed with varying degrees of heat and excitement. Amos Johnstone was easily the most popular person in the village; and further developments were awaited with thrilling interest.

As the market-carts rumbled through on their leisurely way, people called the news to the sleepy drivers, who ruminated on it until slumber overtook them and left them to the wise guidance of their plodding horses. Servants from The Domain and The Meadows went about full of importance and were given respectful attention. Dr. Willett was the object of supreme interest on account of his presence at the examination of the corpse.

Lance and Guin, in a state of intense excitement, went in search of Kythe. By some mystery of telepathy, they informed her of their presence and she came with them to The Domain garden.

She looked years older, and thinner. She was living and using up her emotional resources at a fearful rate.

In the garden she was very silent.

"Have you any news?" asked Lance. "We want to know all we can. It concerns us more than anyone —you and me and Guin."

"My mother is dying," said Kythe, blankly.

They did not know what to answer.

"There is going to be an operation to-morrow. The nurses are coming to-night. Lennox is here, and Luttrell and Hubert are coming to-morrow, and Uncle Harry."

"If there is an operation, it may be all right," suggested Lance.

Kythe shook her head.

"Dr. Willett does not think so. It's her heart. It is all this that has killed her; and I have helped. I have helped to make her miserable. I've promised her, Lance, that I'll look after *him*."

The two, in whose veins, as in hers, ran the man's blood, looked at her, as she said that, as across a gulf. She was further removed from them, it seemed, than if she had died. They saw her go with relief; and she left, in leaving them, the last of her childhood behind her.

CHAPTER XIX

THE TRAP

MR. DESMOND did not manage to get his story told to his sister and brother-in-law. They ate dinner in a brooding silence, which lasted over the coffee and for some time afterwards. Then he roused himself.

It was, however, to talk of his wife. He wanted to know, thirstily, greedily, what had happened when Kythe was born. Was she ill? Did she recover quickly? Had her health been good since? His gnawing anxiety betrayed itself in every word and every searching question. He pursued the enquiry with a lack of reticence that embarrassed the Rector and left Mrs. Raymond speechless.

Long silences, in which Raymond and his wife waited expectantly for the enlightenment promised them, broke the conversation. It seemed as if he could not bring himself to speak of what befell him; and in very truth that was the case. Then came Teresa's interruption, and his mood changed.

He repeated to them the sum of her disclosures, and moved restlessly about the room, his hands in his pockets, his alert glance now here, now there, his head poised to listen, while he stood before the fire, or at

the window, or studied one of the pictures, or looked at a paper unseeingly. And still his tale remained untold.

"It will all come out now," he said at last, in a loud, defiant way. The defiance, they felt vaguely, was not for them; it was directed elsewhere. "It will all come out. It will have to. Who will believe it, I wonder?"

"Oh, David," implored his sister, half-tearfully, half-fretfully, "had you not better tell us?"

He looked at her, from his coign of vantage on the hearth-rug, as if something entirely strange had suddenly been brought to his notice.

"Hadn't I better tell you?" he repeated slowly. "Well, that is what I am trying to do. Trying to do."

His gaze wandered again, and he fell silent once more.

When his sister made a sound of mingled impatience and concern, he looked at her with that strange look of having discovered something new.

"You were with me," he began; and then broke off.

"It was you, wasn't it, with me, when I went out, that day?"

Mrs. Raymond nodded, her heart in her mouth.

"I stayed in the playroom with the children," she ventured.

"Hubert and Hèro," he confirmed. "The babies What a dear little pair they were."

He lost himself again.

"When I went out," he said, after a lapse, "I went for those nails. For nothing else. I had hardly seen

her. I just knew her by sight. Once I had lifted my hat, as I almost walked into her, coming out of our garden-door. I knew nothing about her. It was no doing of mine. God! How a man can get entangled——"

He spoke loudly, protestingly. The sweat gleamed on his coarsened face.

"Trapped, and entangled, and snared; kidnapped—and me a married man and she a school girl! Does it sound likely? Who would believe it? And blackmailed; and falsely accused and convicted; and hounded; and now run to earth—an inconceivable story, and true—true. But who will believe it?"

Hoarse, perspiring, protesting, he pleaded as if before some tribunal.

"Trapped," he repeated, "and robbed. Robbed of my life, my wife, my home, my happiness, my honour. Who will believe me?"

Who indeed? Had he not already been judged and condemned unheard?

"But what did happen, David?"

"I went for those nails," he repeated, drearily. "Out of the garden-door. Would anyone have believed," in frenzied protest, "that anything could have happened, in that short distance?"

"What did happen?" probed the Rector, as one despairing but patient. It seemed as if the man could not get beyond his protest.

"The garden-door of The Domain was open. It wasn't often open. I could not remember having seen it open before, except when the market-garden stuff

was being taken out. An errand-boy came out. He was whistling—he was whistling 'John Jones'—I did not hear the latch catch and knew he had left the door undone. I thought I would look in. I crossed over and went that side of the road—in pure curiosity; in pure curiosity. I meant to peep in. Pure curiosity."

His voice tailed away in a heavy sigh.

"What did you see?"

"I saw nothing. I heard—I heard a groan, and something like a call for help. And then I stepped in. I stepped in—stepped in to my doom. The last happy moment I ever knew."

He looked so hunted, so haggard, so racked with some anguish of recollection, the Rector forebore to press the question burning on his lips.

"What did Honoria do?" began Desmond again, rousing himself unhappily from his painful thoughts.

Now that he was loosing the pent-in tide of memory his desire to know, in regard to his wife, was insatiable. They catered for it, as well as they were able, restraining their own curiosity as best they could.

Then came the second summons; and Constable Thomas bore off his prisoner, the tale remaining untold.

"The man died of fright."

That was what the Rector heard Desmond say, in The Domain library. To be able to make such a statement, he must have been present when young Johnstone died. Was it something that Desmond did, some threat, some act of violence, that so frightened the man to his death? It looked very much as if that must have been the case.

Nothing more would he say; and Teresa declared she would tell her story "at the right time." Now that she was charged too, the Rector presumed she would be telling it!

In talking it over with Mr. Talbot, the Rector got some small measure of comfort.

Mr. Talbot had formed a very strong opinion of Desmond's innocence; and believed the murder to have been committed by Teresa.

"She has got him so that he cannot disprove it," he remarked. "He has been under the harrow all these years—poor wretch, what a fate!"

"It is enough to rob one of one's belief in Providence," said the Rector, sorrowfully. "What does Gervase say, Talbot? I have hardly seen him to speak to, and to-night I naturally could not ask."

They were walking home together after Desmond's arrest.

"I cannot ask him much either," explained Mr. Talbot. "After all, she is his sister—and he knows I want to get at her! Do you know what I hate the thought of, Raymond? That bounding old Gotto. He will shriek 'I told you so' from everlasting unto everlasting."

Mr. Talbot's fears were not unjustified. Before he had time to calm his troubled spirit with his nightly pipe, glass, and Ovid, the uplifted peer was battering on his door, and heralding his arrival with noise and triumphant laughs.

"What did I tell you, what did I tell you?" he roared. "You can't get up earlier in the morning than

Gotto, I tell you. You think you can, but you can't. When it comes to seeing through a brick wall, there's not many can beat me. You know it now, so perhaps you will believe me next time."

Mr. Talbot silenced him for a moment with the whiskey, to which he helped himself largely. He had already had quite a plentiful allowance. His face, of a crimson-purple, most unpleasant to behold, looked as if it might burst at any moment; and he diffused an atmosphere reminiscent of empty casks and deserted bar-rooms, that Mr. Talbot found disgusting.

Gulping and shouting; his drink reverberating noisily in his throat and his inside; the noble and objectionable lord pursued his own panegyric without interruption. It was not until he began to instruct Mr. Talbot as to how the enquiry should be conducted that tempers got ruffled.

"She'll make your best witness," bawled Lord Gotto, referring to Teresa.

"I wouldn't hang a dog on the evidence of a woman like that," retorted Mr. Talbot. "And she is under suspicion herself."

"There's your chance, to get her as King's evidence."

"Her evidence isn't worth the smallest consideration. I should be very sorry for any case for the Crown to be built upon what she could say; and so long as it is in my hands, before it goes higher, I shall assess her evidence at what it is worth. You needn't shout at me, Gotto. It is not the slightest use. And tell me, who gave you news of this?"

"The wretched man's father—Jackson—Johnson."

"Oh! Amos Johnstone. He must have hurried!"

"A very good thing he did. I can see that quite well, Talbot. A very good thing; *someone* has got to watch this case, to prevent your letting that rotter off. For, mark my words, that's what you want to do, Talbot. You want to let him off. You are prepared to strain the law. You are prepared to leave loopholes. I have my eye on you, don't make any mistake about that. And if I find evidence of any hanky-panky, I'll show it up. You can take that from me. I'll show it up without mercy."

He gulped and gurgled and reverberated alarmingly, as he rose, drank, struggled into his fur coat, and got himself off, bawling angrily.

Mr. Talbot, who did not like Mr. Desmond, and had felt most strongly about his unexplained return, went to bed feeling that any advantage he could possibly use for that gentleman's help would be a pleasure; and that if he could provide him with a free pardon for any and every crime he had ever committed, it would be only fitting to do so, in the hope of adding to Lord Gotto's annoyance.

The whole of Fairlands appeared to share Lord Gotto's extreme views; and it was repeated from mouth to mouth that Mr. Talbot meant to twist things in Mr. Desmond's favour at the enquiry. The inquest, of course, was to come first; but a Coroner's jury verdict did not really count for much. It was Mr. Talbot who counted. If he would not commit for trial, it was quite certain his fellow justices would agree with him. It was a scandalous state of things that the administra-

tion of justice should be in such hands. If men like Gotto were on the Bench, now! He was the chap to make 'em wake up and sit up.

Lower Domain was less cocksure. Mr. Desmond was not popular. His conduct had been peculiar, and in a way inexcusable, but no one wanted to see him in prison, much less hanged. The pendulum swung in his favour. Tenterley was gravely concerned; the market-garden men openly said it was a damned shame and the general opinion was that it would be a thorough good riddance if flighty madam at The Domain could be put in his place.

"A good fright would larn her," said the men.

"Pity we can't drown her," said the women. "Drown her and done with her."

Then it was known that she was arrested too.

Amos Johnstone went about with a kind of Nunc Dimittis expression on his face, speaking in excited whispers, trotting about restlessly and erratically. He could stick to nothing in the way of work, and his brother cursed him heartily and said hard things of him and his dead son. Nevertheless, Farmer Johnstone was much impressed, although he would not admit it, with the dogged instinct that had stuck to the trail all those years and been proven right in the end. He cherished a greater respect for Amos—hidden away carefully from its object—and was proud of the distinction shed on the family.

"It was the finding of that there body, that set me athinking," the poor fellow explained everlastingly and at Tenterley's the view was expressed

that old Amos he weren't such a softy as he looked.

By the evening of the day, when Teresa, in a closed carriage, with a female prison attendant, had been driven away to a place of detention, and when Lennox and Hubert arrived, news of Mrs. Desmond's condition leaked out. Dr. Willett went his rounds with a shadow on his cheery old face; and a stream of callers, high and lowly, found their way to The Meadows, asking for news and expressing regret and sympathy. At Tenterley's, the situation was summed up.

"If they don't let him out to see her afore she goos, it won't be justice, it'll be sheer damn cruelty. Worse'n Roossia. Mr. Talbot, he'll never stand for that. He's a rightjious man and he won't goo and part man and wife like that wi'out a last word. I'd sooner he'd get away and 'scape, like he did afore, than see a thing the like of that done. Worse'n Roossia, that'd be."

Having made up her mind to what appeared to be a painful effort, Lady Katherine did not suffer as much from the consequences as Gervase had feared she would do. She braced herself for the ordeal that had to be faced; and in many ways seemed to be returning to her old self. Gervase came to her room, at the end of her interview with Desmond's solicitor, Mr. Beaumont, a lean, melancholy man, very long in the legs and small in the head, who looked as if his dealings with humanity had been disappointing; and found him in the act of stowing away a document with a broken seal in his shabby despatch-case.

"It is mentioned in my will," Lady Katherine was saying, " 'To be handed to Mrs. Desmond.' "

"It would, I venture to think, have been more to the purpose if it had been handed to Mr. Desmond immediately on his return," observed the lawyer, with some severity.

Lady Katherine said nothing; and Gervase intervened hastily, with enquiries for her health.

After a few such insignificant remarks, Gervase gave further information.

"Teresa has made a statement," he said, gravely. "She says the clothes on the skeleton were hers, and that she helped Desmond escape. Her room has been searched—they found the key of one of those doors in her dressing-bag. She says that Desmond lived with her until he jibbed at providing for his children, and that then he bolted; and eventually murdered the man that she sent to find him, and luckily got it brought in manslaughter. He served five years for it, got away to the States and then to South Africa, where he enlisted in a Mounted Police Force under another man's name, and did time on the Breakwater at Cape Town for that. He served in the South African War and got to be sergeant-major in a corps of Light Horse, and has a lot of medals and distinctions in the name of Lennox. Then he went to the Philippines and knocked about there; and she tracked him down all the time. It was there she sent him the news of her death. He threw up everything, as she knew he would, and came home; and as soon as she heard he was here, she followed."

"What does she say about the way Johnstone met his death?" asked the lawyer, after a non-committal pause. Lady Katherine was looking smitten.

"She says Desmond was jealous of the lad, with whom she had a sort of flirtation when no one else was available. Desmond found Johnstone, according to her, kissing her; and got him by his neckcloth, breaking his neck as he flung him down the inner stairs. She got into Johnstone's clothes, and they got away in old Johnstone's market-cart, disposing of the stuff in the usual way. She appears to have gone up to market in that sort of disguise, at night, on other occasions, and helped the young fellow to unload, and so forth; so she was known amongst his mates and the others, who took her for a boy. As Johnstone had already proved dishonest, it was no surprise to anyone. His father got the cart and horses back, and you know how all the rest of it, Teresa's going off and so on, was hushed up."

"It sounds fatally plausible," said the depressing man of business.

"It sounds too horrible," said Lady Katherine, with trembling lips. "Bad as I knew her to be—this is inhuman. Stripping the body, hardly cold; and she only seventeen! Getting into its clothes, dressing it in hers—it sounds hardly human, hardly believable."

"She was rather driven to it, by her account, by Desmond, who carried things with a high hand. We have seen some signs of a sort of brutality in him—everyone has noticed it. And besides, near where the

body was lying they found the green baize apron, that there was so much talk about, all gone to pieces, but quite recognizable."

"Does she say anything," asked the lawyer, "of an accident to him?"

"No, not that I heard of," answered Gervase.

Lady Katherine and the lawyer looked hard into each other's eyes.

"They escaped by that exit, lifting the huge stone—the two of them—without help? *That* may be where *this* comes in," said the lawyer, impressively, tapping the despatch-case. "We shall see."

Lady Katherine nodded, and Gervase felt slightly mystified; but neither of them vouchsafed any further explanation.

Desmond, so far, had made no statement at all, since saying that Johnstone had died of fright. That, and the presence of the apron, were evidence that he had been present when the death took place, or shortly after. But he reserved his defense and was not present at the inquest.

A commendable discretion, also, was displayed by the Coroner's Court. The enquiry was cut down to the narrowest possible limits compatible with the law; and the finding of the jury, who had no wish to associate themselves with the Gotto clique, was that the body was that of William Johnstone, the clothes and effects those of Mrs. Gervase and Mr. Desmond, and that there was no evidence to show how deceased came by his death.

Teresa was called as a witness, but declined to go into the box, on the ground that she was reserving her evidence for her defense before another court.

That green baize apron! Dragged from its obscurity, it became the centre of devouring interest. Such a clue, such a case, was a real boon to press and public; and it leapt from the dimness of local obscurity to the blinding light of a *cause célèbre* and a yellow-press stunt. Lower Domain, hitherto "the world forgetting, by the world forgot," became the haunt of those hacks of the baser papers who seek sensational (and nearly always mis-reported) interviews, silly and offensive photos, and spicy "pars."

"Somebody did ought to put one of they chaps in the pond," opined Tenterley. "It'ud be a lesson." But the bulk of the population preferred the opportunity of seeing their own sage words, and profound suggestions, and unimpressive physiognomies, in print. Lower Domain found itself in the limelight, as it had not done even at the time of Mr. Desmond's disappearance; and it thoroughly enjoyed the sensation.

Needless to say, Lord Gotto gave interviews to everyone. The press representatives, however, so systematically watered down or edited his altogether outrageous and libellous remarks, as to provoke him to declare that they were all in the disgraceful conspiracy to protect Mr. Desmond and defeat the ends of justice. It is incontestable that, had any of the representatives aforesaid caused to be published verbatim, the remarkably frank and abusive statements of the noble lord, he, they, and their papers would have found them-

selves involved in proceedings for libel, slander, defamation, and contempt of court; but the pungency of the remarks was beyond question, and Lord Gotto was right in declaring that they would have been of the greatest interest to a very wide circle.

Seldom had so much drama been crowded into so little space. There was the truth about Mr. Desmond —and the green baize apron—that would come out at last. There were revelations about Mrs. Gervase and her wild doings, and the husband of whom no one had ever heard anything. There was the fate of Willie Johnstone, and the murder of the other man buried near Farmer Johnstone's sheds. There was the secret passage. There was the dangerous illness of Mrs. Desmond, plainly the result of her husband's arrest. And there was Lady Katherine, mixed up in it all.

It is not too much to say, and it is no reflection on their really kind and loyal hearts, that the inhabitants of Lower Domain were prepared to enjoy, since such things had to happen, the things that had happened in their midst; and this did not in any way lessen their deep sympathy with Lady Katherine and Mrs. Desmond. The popular hope was that Mr. Desmond might be cleared, but that Mrs. Gervase might get her deserts. Farther than that they did not go; there was a great lack of enlightening theories or explanations.

Amos Johnstone was silly with excitement, and it seemed not unlikely that his destination, after all, would be the Asylum. He wandered about with fussy, trotting steps, found it impossible to sit still for two minutes together, and kept a constant vigil outside the

police-station, where he poured out a trickle of foolish questions.

People flocked over to the grubby little town of Gorlett for the enquiry. The Court would not hold all, or nearly all, of those who thronged round it, greedy for sensation, picking up and passing round every likely and unlikely story that imagination could coin.

Among the few sparse fragments of truth, it was said that Mrs. Desmond was dying and that Teresa was turning King's evidence.

Mr. Talbot was not able to prevent it. The case for the Crown was considered weak, and any evidence there might be against Mrs. Gervase would involve lesser offenses than murder. So it was decided to use her evidence for the prosecution.

It was her own shameless vileness that damaged that evidence and helped to break down the case for the Crown. Her strongly-displayed animus against the man who was the father of her children, her frank admission of pursuit and persecution and threats of exposure, of his efforts to evade her and his defiance of her, created an impression only natural under the circumstances.

On the top of that came the story of the sealed document handed by Lady Katherine to Desmond's lawyer, and supported by an affidavit from Lady Katherine herself.

The bottom was completely knocked out of the case.

"I do not think it would be possible," said Mr. Talbot, with grave severity, "to find a jury in the length and breadth of the land, who would convict on the

evidence of such a witness. The prisoner is discharged. There is no case on which to commit him for trial. I will not add any words that will make his burden heavier, for whatever he may have done contrary to law and good order, he has paid for over and over again. I shall communicate with the Attorney General with a view to a charge of perjury against this witness; and I desire to express the sympathy of the Court with the victim of her accusation and with the honourable family whose name has been so undeservedly besmirched by this unworthy member of it.

"You are discharged," said Mr. Talbot, leaning towards the prisoner and speaking with extraordinary consideration.

It was the second time he had said it. Mr. Desmond did not seem to understand.

The Rector was at his side, leading him away, before he collected himself, and he was driven home without any lingering.

In the room where Kythe and Gervase had seen his strong control break down; the room where his wife had come to him in his shame and agony; he sat alone, waiting for the doctor's verdict.

He had been told, the day before, when the enquiry opened, of his wife's dangerous condition, and the operation that had become horribly necessary. Dr. Willett was upstairs now, with two strange men and a nurse. May was sobbing helplessly, Mrs. Raymond waiting to see what use she could be, Lennox, Luttrell and Hubert crowding aimlessly and miserably in the playroom with Hero.

Alone he sat, refusing all company, staring out into the garden, going over the strange story told in the Court that day and the day before, ranging among his bitter memories, seeing ever and again the hideous scenes in which he had figured, through which he had lived, the hell in which he had agonised; and wondering why he had not killed the woman who had brought him to it.

She had not only brought him to agony and despair; she had brought Honoria to it too. She had killed Honoria. His hands clenched, and the tell-tale scar reddened and glistened.

He touched it with his fingers to still its throbbing.

It was that scar that had saved him. Teresa had forgotten!

The enquiry had dragged all to light.

Desmond remembered the various phases of it, but hardly as if they concerned him.

He remembered listening to Teresa's vicious account, with its artful suppressions and eliminations, hearing her dotting the i's, crossing the t's, underlining the meanings, that were to condemn him; owning to her love for him—her shameful love because he was like another man she had loved—damning him deeper with every word.

He heard the change in his counsel's voice, the little lilt of triumph, when he asked,

"Did the prisoner give you active assistance in all this—in undressing and re-dressing the corpse, in getting out by the exit at the Homestead Farm?"

"Yes." An unhesitating yes.

"In spite of his serious condition?"

"Do you mean his danger of arrest?"

"Very smart, Mrs. Gervase. But not smart enough. I refer to his physical condition. Come now, will you tell the Court how he came by that scar on his head, who the half-conscious man was who was helped into Johnstone's waggon, and who the man was who helped him in? And how, if that man were the prisoner, he could have taken part in any act requiring strength or exertion?"

And as Teresa made no answer to this broadside, counsel continued,

"We will call Amos Johnstone presently. He will tell us what he can, and I think it will be sufficient."

Desmond remembered it, word for word, as he stood staring out of the window into the garden—the garden from which he had gone out that fateful day. It was not the scene in the Court that was real; it was those other scenes recalled from the past, whipped into vivid life by that woman's tongue.

He remembered how he had gone down the lane, lightly and unheedingly; he could hear the garden door slam behind him. He remembered, as he had told his sister, seeing an errand-boy come whistling out of The Domain garden door, and go lazily down to the village street, without turning his head. The Domain garden door failed to give that familiar suck and plug; it had not shut. He saw it, standing ajar.

He remembered the impulse of idle, boyish curiosity,

on which he had peeped in. Peeped in and seen nothing; and then hastily withdrawn, rather ashamed of but amused at himself and his impulse.

And then he had heard a sort of cry, and peeped in again.

Turning his head to the left, he saw the doorway of the Old Tower. On the threshold sat Teresa, young, audacious, alluring, her foreign, expressive face twisted as if in pain.

"Have you hurt yourself?" he asked, moved to explain his presence. "I thought I heard someone call."

"I have hurt my knee," complained Teresa, in her rich, warm voice. She stared at him as if startled. It was the sight of him peeping in, as he got to know afterwards, that startled her and made her slip on the step.

"Do you know," she said, "at first I thought you were—someone quite different! You gave me a fright!"

"Can't I help you?" he asked, itching to do something useful.

"Yes. Help me down this stair, please."

Surprised, he helped her to her feet.

He could feel her now, in his arms, feigning helplessness, clinging to him for support. She was warm and supple; the feel of her hair in his face, her body against his, was an adventure. Her face, now laughing, now pre-occupied, and then twisted up again to sham pain—she had only given her knee a little graze —was as tempting as a face could be, with its wide smile, its warm youth.

He helped her down, with the leathern case and parcel that she was carrying.

She opened a door, in the dark; and stumbled with him down some steps, fumbling with the door and then swinging it to behind them. He looked round in surprise, at the long, low, roughly-furnished room.

His face scorched still as he remembered how it went on.

She sat on the table beside him, holding on to him, pulling down her silk stocking to show her grazed knee. Was ever a man caught in such a toil so easily?

It was dark; only lighted by one candle. She held him fast; told him she was afraid; afraid of something he did not know of; something that had happened. A dreadful thing—she could not tell him, but she was afraid.

He did not know, he never knew, how long he stayed there, comforting her, laughing with her—making love to her. That dreadful love-making—his face scorched at the thought of it.

"Haven't I got pretty knees?" she said.

He remembered how he answered—remembered how the infamy of it came home to him in a flash, of the honour and loyalty he was being lured to forget. He remembered how he made for the door, and heard her tremulous, frightened laugh—for she *was* frightened, of something he did not understand. He remembered getting the clumsy door to open across the steps; and stepping up into the cellar.

Something moved in front of him, and he stopped for an instant. A light flashed into his eyes, dazzling him.

The dark form confronting him made an inarticulate sound, and then with a furious oath struck at him.

He remembered the blow, and the rain of sparks it seemed to shower round him, or strike off him. It gave him a momentary surprise. He heard the thud of his own fall; and the fall or ring of something metal on stone paving. He knew no more, till the maddening pain, as of a screw twisting in his head, brought him to a wretched and confused consciousness.

CHAPTER XX

THE SCAR

THE girl was huddled beside him, holding his head, round which she had wrapped a towel. It had been bleeding heavily; his neck was sticky with blood.

She gave him water, which revived him considerably. He was a healthy, powerful man; and though he felt stupid and confused, and was in acute pain, he began to feel that he had not been so severely injured as might have been the case.

The girl was frankly terrified; and in her relief at his recovery, nestled against him, holding his head in her arms, kissing his lips alluringly. He was too confused to repel her; and presently he felt drowsy and dozed. When he roused himself, and got to his feet, and she helped him into a chair by the table, he began to think of what he had better do.

If he went back, the murderous attack in the cellar might be renewed! Who it was, that waited and watched there, neither of them knew. The mystery of it baffled and daunted them, and he remembered how he became acutely conscious that she had some knowledge of possible dangers which he did not possess, and that his momentary impulse of childish cur-

iosity had landed him in a position more serious than he cared to think of.

He remembered the half-guilty start with which he heard the approach of footsteps from beyond the further door at the other end of the long, low room. The girl clutched him with gripping hands round his shoulders; he rose to his feet, the towel falling from his head; a fresh trickle of blood crawled down his cheek and ear. His arm was round her waist. They stood, as if in the most intimate relation, waiting; their eyes glued to the door, which opened slowly and cautiously.

The man who came in was Willie Johnstone. He stood a moment as if struck with paralysis. No sound came from his open mouth.

Then he flung an arm across his eyes. A cry that was neither a word nor a shout; and then a hoarse, protesting call.

"Craven! No. Ah—no!"

The last word was a scream, and he fell backwards.

He was dead when they reached him.

Desmond did not know how long they spent, trying desperately to restore the stricken man. He seemed to live life after life in that dim underground region.

He tried to go for help; but she prevented him. His head ached and throbbed, and bled incessantly. His brain grew dizzy with perplexed thought. He had no strength left to move or to decide. He lay down on a rough camp bed to try to think things over.

The girl crept into his arms. His blood raced as he remembered——

She told him then what had happened, what had led up to this, what she was afraid of. It had to be told him over and over again, before he could grasp the ins and outs of it.

The man he was like, whom she called Craven, had been her lover, a year ago. She was expelled from school on account of him. He was a brute, she said; his temper, his language, his threats; a friend he brought with him; she grew terrified of them both. Willie Johnstone was one of their tools; they used the market-waggon for getting about in, at night. Teresa had found the door in the cellar, discovered the lock, fitted the piece of cork into the keyhole to disguise it; and had come in unexpectedly on the gang, who had found the other entrance near Farmer Johnstone's shed. They had not suspected the existence of the inner cellar door, as, when closed, it fitted into the wall without a trace.

They were receivers of stolen goods. Craven fell in love with Teresa, and she joined them and stood in with them, enjoying the illicit excitement of their perilous trade. They had lately had reason to believe they were marked down, and were making all their plans for getting away. Craven, said Teresa, was jealous of young Johnstone, and meanly accused the lad of being the one who had given them away. Johnstone, who was also jealous of Craven—the girl had evidently pitted one against the other in her unscrupulous intrigues—then quarrelled violently with Craven. They had fought near the farm sheds and Craven had been quite unexpectedly and unintentionally killed.

Johnstone was half mad with terror at what he had done. He hid the body temporarily under some rubbish in the sheds, and found Teresa in the cellar. Both of them were at their wits' end, between their dread of an accusation of murder and the imminent peril of arrest for the original offence of theft in which they believed they stood; and Craven's other mate, who also knew how to gain access to the underground tunnel, came upon them before they had formed any plan or summoned up courage to deal with the corpse. In the early hours of that dreadful morning the two men dug a shallow grave under the manure heaps, and buried Craven there, where he had been killed, using the manure to scatter about and obliterate all footmarks and traces, and arranging with Amos Johnstone to take the cart out himself that evening, and leave them the night free. The little man was, of course, in complete ignorance of the tragedy.

The other man, who carried out all the dealings with Amos, told him that his son was in fresh trouble, and arranged for the cart to be available the next night to take them up to town, whence they intended to get away from the country. Teresa knew where some of the valuables were stowed, and her business the afternoon that Desmond came upon her, was to get these packed in readiness for the journey. She was well aware that this mate of Craven's would have no hesitation in doing her out of her share if he got the chance, or in taking his revenge on her if she played him false, and she was beginning to feel desperate.

The sight of Desmond, peeping in at the garden door, scared her afresh, so that she slipped and fell. He had a curious likeness in build and colour to Craven, who, moreover, often used a leathern apron. The green baize apron gave the slight likeness a stronger accentuation.

Johnstone must have seen the uncanny likeness, just as Teresa did, to the man he had killed and buried. Craven had been struck on the head; the blood running down Desmond's face, his attitude with Teresa in his arms, helped the illusion.

Sheer fright must have killed him.

Much of the story—the worst part—the criminal part, the tale of Teresa's tricks and intrigues and shameless *liaisons,* of the clashing tempers and alternating fits of passion and hatred, the thieving and lying, the bribing of poor old Amos with promises of help for his scapegrace son, was withheld; but enough was got into Desmond's head to turn him dizzy with horror. Here he was, mixed up in this most awful business; how he was going to get out of it without an appalling *exposé,* he could not think. And his head was aching; and the girl was clinging to him and kissing him; and he could not remember clearly how far she had lured him in her wanton love-making—he shrank from attempting to remember; and outside the door—his only wày of escape—was a murderous enemy, perhaps still waiting to complete his work!

Johnstone's death necessarily imperilled the gang's escape; and Teresa's mind ran on the anger of the

third man, Craven's mate, whose plans would be upset. She dreaded what he might do in his anger, if thwarted.

By the time he arrived, furious and foul-mouthed, but stricken into silence by the sight of dead Johnstone and the story of the assault on Desmond at the cellar door, Desmond's senses had wandered away, and he was only half conscious of his surroundings.

The position Teresa and this man were now faced with was that someone else knew of the cellar entrance, and knew that Desmond was within it.

Who it was that had watched and waited there and made the murderous attack was a profound mystery and a great danger. Amos Johnstone, miserably anxious about his son, was willing to do anything they wanted; the safest thing was to get away. So, collecting the valuables, and half-carrying Desmond, they made their way by the other exit into the sheds, and with the assistance of Amos Johnstone, got Desmond safely stowed in the waggon.

Standing over the frightened girl, the bully gave his orders. Desmond was to be Craven for the time being; that would still the tongues of any of the other associates who might get to hear that the party was one short. With brutal oaths, that echoed dimly in Desmond's fuddled head, he forced her to help him strip the corpse and put on its clothes. Desmond's green baize apron was rolled up and tossed down beside it.

Desmond was covered with an old coat of Craven's,

hiding his blood-stained shirt; and a cap pulled down over his bandaged head. Amos Johnstone, who thought the staggering gentleman was Craven, and attributed his condition to drink, and who never for one moment associated him with Desmond, received with gratification Teresa's assurance that Willie would come and say good-bye to him in a day or two, and that she and Craven would look after him in Australia and see that he was all right, undertaking also to do their very best to keep him out of reach of the law. And so they left Lower Domain, without a thing to cast suspicion on them.

When Desmond recovered his wandering senses, he was lying in a frowsy bunk, two days out at sea. Teresa and the ruffian who gave them orders, were with him. Later on she was alone with him.

It was a day or two before his mind cleared completely, and the extent of his misfortunes came home to him. By that time, it was taken for granted that Teresa was his woman; he could not free himself——

His physical weakness was far less than the state of his mind would have indicated. It was his brain that seemed in a fashion numbed. What with the blow and the high temperature, and the shock, both mental and physical, he could not straighten out his thoughts. When he did, they nearly drove him mad.

The big ruffian exercised a sort of supervision. The girl, for all her audacity, was afraid of him, as she had been of the man with whom she had so fatally entangled herself, and at whose death she secretly re-

joiced. Yet she had loved him, in a way. His person attracted her; and it was the same attraction that proved Desmond's undoing.

She took refuge with him from the other man. At night, lying in his arms, exercising all her allurements, she fascinated him with her charm, and sickened him with her precocious depravity. The sneering ruffian would come in on them, at any moment; with a brutal laugh, or a more brutal sneer or a silent cold scrutiny worse than either. He was supposed to share the cabin with them.

The nightmare voyage seemed to last into eternity. It always had been, always would be; nothing else had ever been, all else was a figment of the most fantastic imagination. That alone was reality.

The big ruffian was always suspicious of him.

When they landed, and Desmond wanted to take the next ship back, the position was brutally explained to him. If he went back, he could give them away. The big man wasn't "taking any chances." Either he stayed where he was and "looked after" Teresa, or he would be accused of the murder of Willie Johnstone.

The months he spent with the depraved girl, the horror with which he looked on the children he begot, the aching, gnawing longing for what he had lost, his escape, the tracking down, and the false charge of murder of the blackmailing brute she sent after him, brought and almost proven against him; the verdict of manslaughter, the penal sentence, the subsequent years of pursuit, persecution, privation, toil, the growing

knowledge that he had lost all chance of going home with any conceivable explanation, the shame at his record—it all came back in waves of heat and cold, of anger and desperation. The sight of the announcement of Teresa's death—he remembered *that,* too; and how he had made for home like a hunted beast, with the audacity of despair.

In all that life of horror, after he worked free of the confused impressions of the voyage, what kept him going was the beacon-light of home. Shining through gloom indescribable, it lighted him to effort after effort at securing his freedom. The death by violence of the ruffian who helped Teresa keep her strangle-hold on his life, reduced the witnesses against him to one; and memory of his home, the home he had lost, the wife, the babies, stood out in clearer and yet clearer relief—clean, pure things, to recover which he vainly and pantingly struggled.

And his return, to a family of strangers with whom he had little in common, who shrank from his coarsened fibre, whose fastidious perceptions sensed the convict and the outcast; the wife who wore a widow's cap, and who had borne a child he had never known; the grown-up sons incensed at their mother's position, the censure of the neighbours and old friends—that home-coming had been bitterer far than exile.

The new and sterner forms of manliness which he had perforce learned among the criminal riff-raff and the hardy pioneers with whom his lot had cast him, and with whom he had grit enough to "make good" and prove himself a man indeed, enabled him to keep

his feelings to himself, to drink the cup to the dregs without a wry face, and to keep his hideous secrets. Never by word or phrase, since coming home, had he betrayed himself, or let fall a clue to his wanderings.

The return of Teresa, triumphant in her last intrigue, the knowledge that the boy and girl so securely ensconced at The Domain and on the most intimate terms with his wife's children, were those illegitimate children from the thought of whose very existence he shrank, hit him so hard it was a miracle that he was able to keep his balance. Yet still he kept his lips closed, his face unmoved. No man, surely, ever lived through such an ordeal.

The threat Teresa still held over him, the silence she half-promised as the price of renewing his relations with her, the terrifying assurance that he was the only man she had really loved, and that she would rather see him hanged than living happily with his wife, were mere details in the general horror.

In open court, before his three sons, his daughter, his sister and her husband, his old friend, the story had been told to the last bitter word. What Teresa's statement suppressed, Desmond's revealed. And the dramatic climax was the disclosure of the mystery to which no clue had been found till then—the story of the blow on the head that had felled Desmond when emerging from the secret cellar door.

The document handed to his solicitor by Lady Katherine, signed, witnessed, and sealed up by the old Squire, contained the explanation.

A word dropped by Hugh, who in his workroom in

the Old Tower heard more than Teresa allowed for, made the old Squire realise that Teresa was still prosecuting her low intrigue with the man who was supposed to belong to the market-garden confraternity. He caught a glimpse of a man in an apron and with rolled up sleeves; craned his neck and saw him with his arms round Teresa, taking her down the Old Tower cellar steps.

In a rage, such as in his youthful days had made men fear him, the Squire sought a weapon. In one of the garden houses he found and snatched up the loose stove bar. Stealthily following and lurking, he crept to the cellar, but could hear and see nothing. Twice he went up to the garden and came down again. The second time, with a lantern to guide his search, he met the man in the apron face to face, apparently emerging from the floor.

The old Squire was a powerful as well as a passionate man. He struck blindly and furiously. Heard the groan and fall, and the rattle of the weapon that dropped from his weakened hand as he realised what he had done. Could make out nothing definite, in the obscurity, lighted only by one candle; but was conscious that a door closed silently in his face.

No word did he say of what had happened, locking it up in his own mind. A plausible story was presented to the neighbourhood about his granddaughter's disappearance, which was attributed by him and Lady Katherine, rightly, to a disgraceful elopement, on the subject of which they preserved unbroken silence. Every help was rendered in the search for the missing Mr.

Desmond, in completely disinterested sympathy, but when the description of that gentleman, and the tale of the green baize apron, came to his knowledge, the Squire knew what it was he had done.

Divided between wrath that his own neighbour, a married man with a family, should have been his granddaughter's guilty lover, and dread that he himself was the murderer of the missing man, his days were days of torment and unrest. Teresa's letters, mocking and insolent, gave no clue to the Desmond mystery; and as time went on, the conclusion was irresistible that the blow had caused death.

No investigation ever enabled him to discover the secret of the cellar door. He searched continually and with immense precaution, unwilling to share with anyone the half-knowledge he possessed; to no effect. Three years after the event, he told his wife what it was that was preying on his mind. The constant sight of the bereaved Desmond family overcame his resolution to keep silence.

Lady Katherine urged him to place the facts on record; but was even more resolute than he to keep the secret, protect their name, and save him from open trial. If Desmond were killed, nothing could give him back to Mrs. Desmond. If he had gone off with Teresa, by some underground way, better that Mrs. Desmond should not know.

They had covered up Teresa's elopement, and stifled the scandal by methods the haughty old couple hardly cared to discuss even between themselves. They were

unused to intrigue and hated lies only one degree less than the shame of open scandal.

And it remained at that, but an ever-growing weight of conscience burdened the old lady's soul and made her scrupulously considerate and protective towards Mrs. Desmond.

It was this blow, with the corresponding scar, the finding of the iron stove-bar, and the testimony of Amos Johnstone—that he had helped to get a staggering, half-conscious man, whom he took to be Craven, into his waggon that fateful night, the night of Mr. Desmond's disappearance—that gave the lie to Teresa's statement. Her tale was not wholly and solely dictated by malice, bad though it was. It was, in part, self-preservation. Judging others by her own standard, and realising that her brother and Mr. Talbot were disposed to assume her probable guilt under almost any accusation, she was not sure that Desmond would not seize the opportunity of paying her back for old scores by laying the burden of the murder or murders on her shoulders. Under such circumstances, the threat held over him so long became an effective and necessary weapon of defence as well as attack.

In her evidence, all mention of the man who was their partner and their task-master was suppressed. Desmond's story, which included such a person, was, however, sufficiently corroborated by Amos Johnstone to be accepted. Amos knew very little about the man, and had only seen him once before; his memory was hazy and he mixed him up continually with the

dead Craven. In conjunction with the finding of remains which in all probability could be no other than Craven's, and added to the dazed little man's continual reminders to the Court that it was the discovery that those remains were not Mr. Desmond's that first filled him with suspicion and made him beg to have things "cleared up," Lady Katherine's evidence secured Desmond's complete vindication.

The public taste for sensation was indeed gratified.

CHAPTER XXI

KYTHE TAKES THE REINS

MRS. DESMOND lay dying. Her breath came in short gasps, her fair skin was darkened and coarsened, her lips purple and swollen. All day she moaned and tossed in discomfort, taking little heed of her surroundings, rousing herself to a gesture or word of recognition, or a faint, shadowy attempt at a smile, only at the sound of Kythe's voice.

The bed, tilted at the foot to relieve the failing heart, gave a comfortless look to the room. Her sons and daughters, strangling with their grief, felt a vague, helpless anger against doctors and nurse, who stood between them, and whose ministrations had reduced her to this.

"If they had let her alone, she would have lived longer. It would not have been like this."

So they raved, ignorant of illness, waving aside the chance—the one chance—of life that the operation provided.

Their anger rose highest against their father. Great as was their indignation with the medical men and the subservient nurse, their real resentment centred round their father; a silent, growing force of resentment that

found no outlet in words, but, sullen and concentrated, penetrated to the recesses of the unhappy man's soul and scorched it.

All day, he sat at the head of her bed. All day she lay, moaning, gasping, tossing restlessly, calling inarticulately, requiring constant readjustment of the bed and her body, in the intolerable discomfort. At intervals he laid his head on the pillow and she turned her face against his. No word passed between them.

No one knew what had passed. None could say whether all had been made clear, or whether in her great love, no forgiveness had been needed. The sands slipped away fast; the lethargy induced by morphia, and the exhaustion of ebbing life, made all further confidence impossible. At the last she pushed him away, and died strangling, struggling for air, crying out in hoarse protest or pain, refusing to acknowledge his presence or his touch, her last glance for Kythe. A huddled, grey-faced wreck, he left the death-chamber, without a trace of his strong self-control.

Kythe came to him, in his room where he sat at his desk with his head on his arms. He looked at her in hard anger, but she was not daunted.

"You are to drink this," she said unflinchingly; and stood over him while he did so.

Her face was disfigured with tears and bore a strange likeness to the other disfigured face that had tossed all day on the uncomforting pillows. He wished, drearily, that she did not hate him, and forgot his own dislike of her in the wish.

She was so like Honoria—more like than any of them. Honoria loved her so dearly because—his thoughts wandered, as he tried to trace the *because*, back to his disappearance, his misfortune, his anguish, his martyrdom—it all began over again.

"Father!" Kythe was saying, with an insistent hand on his shoulder. "You must lie down here. I have got the sofa ready for you. Lie down. Take these and finish your soup."

He took the dose meekly, and lay down. She undid his boots, made him take off his coat and braces; and covered him with a big rug.

When he woke, she was beside him with a cup of tea.

All the dreadful days that followed, he was conscious of her watchful care. His brother and Lennox, and the Rector and Hermione, looked after everything. He was not allowed to see his wife again; the face was too greatly changed.

He stood at the graveside, dazed and wretched, until the end of the ceremony. When he tried to lock himself in his study, after getting rid of Harry and Charley —what good fellows they were!—he found the key was missing.

At Tenterley's, that night, the village Parliament discussed the story late and long. While divided in opinion on some of the points, there was a consensus of gratification that Teresa was likely to be proceeded against for perjury and get some part of what she deserved.

"A —— good job, too," said the bird-seed man.

"Ah," said Constable Thomas, in rich agreement.

"Pore old Johnstone," observed a young man who was assistant at the linen-draper's; "he didn't really expeck what he got, I don't believe. I believe that what he thought was that if he pushed 'em hard enough, they'd find his boy, alive and not dead."

"He's all of a maze still," remarked Tenterley, with his usual quiet sympathy for sufferers. "Can't seem to be able to grasp it, that his pore boy was lying dead all that time; and folks gooing on about his being a bad lad and crool to his father and all that. He gets that upset, thinking back on all that talk, you wouldn't believe."

"It's to be hoped that Madam will get what she desarve," said the bell-man. "When you think she gooed off and left the young fella dead and never gave no word to the old man, and rigged up all the time in the clothes off his dead body, and knowing all the time as how he'd killed the other—well; it fair takes your breath away—and she only a slip of a girl!"

"She was properly frightened, though, by that chap as made her do it," ventured the postman, between volumes of smoke puffed from the very foulest clay pipe ever allowed to defile the air.

"Goo on," said Tenterley, scornfully. "Her frightened! Not her. All tark, about being frightened. Put him up to it, most like."

"Females is a terror," opined Constable Thomas, "when they's made that way. There's things a man ud never do, they'll do without turning a hair."

This sentiment was received with favour.

"And if it comes to that," said the new man, who was employed at Sutton's the plumber, "there's not much to be said for the old lady, either."

No one but a new-comer could have said this. They had all kept their tongues off Lady Katherine.

"She did a pretty hard-necked thing, you know," he went on, unconscious of offence. "Knoo as how the old gentleman had as good as killed someone, and thought it must be Mr. Desmond; and never to say a word all those years—why! It's pretty disgraceful, I think! After he was dead and all, there was no excuse!"

There was no response to this. They shifted their feet uneasily, and sucked at their pipes, or refilled or relighted them. No one wished to join in blaming Lady Katherine.

"He's had bad treatment, he has, that pore gentleman, first and last. Not a living soul to help him clear himself or free himself; everything in a sort of conspiracy to tie him up—it sounds like that sort of a bad dream you can't wake up from. And now his wife, pore lady, that must have had a sore heart, first and last; gone before she known he was cleared; it's a cruel bad business, pore things. All their lives gorn. Wasted away by that wicked, good-for-nothing baggage—who's going to talk about a 'Good God,' when things like that can happen, so unfair and so onlucky!"

"A good lady, Mrs. Desmond," murmured Tenterley. "A good, kind lady, as *was* a lady and behaved as such."

"Ah!" said a socialistically-disposed person who was

in the scavenging department of the local Council. "She was a nice lady, and her life has been spylt. And what I want to know is——" here he directed his remarks rather pointedly at Constable Thomas, who leant forward in his favourite attitude, arms on his knees, head turned a little sideways and enquiringly—"what I want to know is, isn't the other lady going to be dealt with? I don't mean this precious Mrs. Gervase, which she isn't 'missis' at all: she's *'miss';* but milady over there. That's what I want to know."

"Why? Whatever have *she* done to be dealt with?" asked the bird-seed man, aggressively, while Tenterley and Constable Thomas exchanged a glance of deep understanding.

"What has she done? She's kept silent when she ought to have spoke. I'm not saying that she ought to have given the old gentleman away; not at all. Wives aren't called on to give evidence against their husbands. But after he was dead? Come now, after he was dead, and the other lady wondering all the time what become of *her* husband; oughtn't milady to have spoken then? I hold she ought; and if it had been *your* missis, Tenterley, instead of a 'Lady,' she'd have been pulled up for being an accessory or something like that. What I say is, there's one law for the rich and one for the poor, and none of you can deny it."

This speech was warmly echoed by the plumber's man and the draper's assistant, and they asked Constable Thomas what was going to be done about it.

Constable Thomas shook a wary head.

"You better ask Lord Gotto," he grinned. "It's him as knoos all about the Law."

That started them off again.

"Old Gotto," said the bird-seed man, quoting his niece, the housemaid, "was talking as if he had done all the discovering. He has forgotten how he had gone on about its being young Mr. Marx that was the corpse and Mr. Desmond that was the murderer; and he was shouting all day long at everyone, 'What did I tell you? Didn't I say so from the first? That woman ought to get fifteen years,' and he and Mr. Talbot had quite a dust-up over it."

"It's a bad day for the aristocracy when people like Lord Gotto can goo and call theirself lord," opined Tenterley. "He would have it, the silly old gas-bag, that Mr. Desmond, he had murdered young Mr. Marx; and when he finds that pore young Johnstone, he murdered a proper blackguard that had no more to do with Mr. Marx than with the man in the moon, and that Mr. Desmond he's been saddled with it unjustly all these years, then he goos and shouts 'I said so all along.' Doesn't it make a man sick?"

"Ah," came the sage chorus, in varying tones of wisdom and agreement.

"They do say," began the bird-seed man in a lowered voice, "that Major Gervase, he's terrible taken up with little Miss Desmond, and that all this, and his sister having those two children to Mr. Desmond, it has put them off and no one will allow them to be married. Did you hear aught about it?" to Tenterley.

Tenterley nodded.

"A bad business," he sighed.

"Will they stay here, do you think?"

No one could say.

"And the two families being such good friends, and all," continued the chatty plumber. "If you was to read it in one of these novelettes, you wouldn't believe it. I wonder what Mr. Desmond felt like, when he come home and find, first his natural-born children all running in and out of his home with his other children; and then the woman that he gone off with, come back and meeting him in Church and being friendly with his wife—I wouldn't have been in his shoes! My word, I wouldn't!"

The silence was impressive.

"*Could* they get married?" asked the socialistic scavenger. "I don't see why not. They aren't really related. Major Gervase's sister lived with Mr. Desmond; it don't make no difference to Major Gervase and Mrs. Desmond's daughter——"

"Ah," said Constable Thomas, getting up and straightening himself. "People like that—they couldn't face it. They'd never allow it. Lady Katherine—it would turn her blue; and bring the old gentleman out of his grave."

"A lot of it is the old gentleman's and Lady Katherine's fault; and I don't see why the Major and his little lady have got to suffer for it. It would be more sensible, and more Christian, and more human, if they were to make up their minds to let bygones be bygones, and to put it all behind them. Major Gervase is a fine gentleman and as good as gold, and little Miss

Desmond, I never hear anything but good of her. The servants up at The Meadows, they say the way she nursed her mother, and the way she looks after her father—it's more like the mother of a family than a little school girl."

These questions of social ethics for the gentry being manifestly not for them to decide, the conversation glided to the more congenial one of what term of imprisonment Teresa was likely to get. And a further suggestion from the postman, who was a stern opponent of popery, that it was her papish upbringing that was at the bottom of it all, provoked a tremendous discussion, affording vast opportunity for the socialistic and scavenging gentleman, who was against all religions; the postman being nevertheless able to show that Hugh and Teresa Gervase, who were of their mother's Church, had both turned out badly, whereas the Major, who always held by the Church of England, was the pick of the bunch.

"The Pope," declared the postman, warming up to his favourite topic, "he's at the bottom of more than half the mischief in the world."

"Religions is," asserted the socialistic scavenger. "Pope, or priest, or parson, or preacher; they are all alike. When we get rid of the lot, it will be a blessed day for the old world."

In an overwhelming catastrophe, and scandal, such as had taken the Desmond family in its swirl, it is a truly bewildering thing for the chief actors or victims to find how they can go on with the usual small ceremonies and duties of ordinary life, how they can talk

ordinary talk, discuss ordinary matters, and meet each other, and other people, in ordinary fashion, in spite of the unordinary events that have invaded their routine. It never fails to surprise the actors in such tragedies, when they find themselves unfolding their table-napkins and eating the usual meal of the usual courses; or calling out in the morning to know if the bath-room is vacant, or worrying because there are traces of snails in the greenhouse. They are seized from time to time with a sense of the littleness of what seemed to them so monstrous, the fleeting nature of the emotions that appeared as if they must wipe out all the rest of life. They feel that they are heartless, shallow, even callous. And sometimes they feel that the "life" of which they often talk with so little understanding, is a vast, cold, unfeeling machine on whose wheels they are hurried along relentlessly; that to mourn their dead adequately, to pause for a view that will give a sane perspective, to tarry for a space in contemplation before being rushed over the threshold of some new experience, is alike impossible and forbidden.

The Desmonds, severally and collectively, with more or less of acuteness and perception, felt these things in the days following their father's trial and their mother's death and funeral. It seemed impossible to settle to anything; yet things had to be done and arranged for, just as before the disaster; and routine rolled its car over the shattered emotions, flattening them out with its commonplace rumble and jolt.

At first they talked in undertones, and alluded to what had occurred in guarded phrases, with little

bursts of tears, and chokings, and strangled outbreaks of anger and regret. By degrees they came down to a hopeless quiet and resignation; things were done because they could not be helped; things were spoken of because they had to arrive at decisions. Amos Johnstone had to be given details of his son's death; Mrs. Desmond's clothes had to be disposed of; rooms had to be re-arranged; bills had to be paid, the tombstone chosen, mourning ordered, letters written. In the accumulating host of petty needs and duties, tragedy thinned and subsided into commonplace.

The sense of the inevitableness of sorrow, and its insignificance, hung heavily about the younger members. It was amazing that such things should happen to them, should invade their home; yet no one else seemed amazed. Such things happened in sensational novels; and here they were on their own hearth, and the world had not stopped moving. Nay; it was moving on at exactly the same rate in the same way; the neighbours made no difference in their habits; the tradesmen called as usual. It passed away as if it did not matter, and things went on as before.

It did not matter to others. Very soon it would not matter much to them! Did anything matter? It was a terrifying thought, and gave them dreadful, jerky moments at night, so that they drove it away and would not let it come too close.

The thing that in anticipation is incredible and monstrous, is, when it comes, bearable in a degree that only the philosopher can understand. Lady Katherine felt this, as well as the Desmonds. The horror she

had held at arm's length, and had risked truth and honour and peace of mind to avert, was not so horrible when it came. It was more irritating than overwhelming, more humiliating than painful. Lady Katherine, released from the strain, the anguish, and the fear of Heaven knew what in the way of consequences, was almost peevish in the reaction, and was inclined to think she had made too much of the trouble altogether. Of Teresa she washed her hands; and was disposed to ride the high horse with her grandson and to minimise the wrong done to the Desmonds. Gervase, who, to use his own expression, was "ratty" too, took this ill, and resented it hotly for the Desmonds.

The loss of their mother was the one thing from which the young people could not recover; and the concentrated ill-will of which their father was the object, made family life at The Meadows strained and uncomfortable.

Mr. Desmond slipped into a life apart, cared for only by Kythe. They drifted into the habit of sitting together in the study, silent and uncommunicative, in a desolate fellowship of sorrow which they could discuss with no one. He never kissed her, nor established any close relationship with her, nor asked for her confidence. She told him nothing and gave him nothing but her company. What comfort each found in the other, neither could have said.

May and Hero took melancholy possession of Mrs. Desmond's room, and the playroom was abandoned to the brothers. It was no longer the happy hunting-ground of Lance and Guin; nor did any of the Des-

monds go over to The Domain or the luridly attractive Tower room, where, however, the young Gervases would not stay after dark.

Lady Katherine whisked them off to the seaside, with the Chinese nurse and her own personal attendants, before they had time to recover their equilibrium. No one saw Teresa or knew where she actually was; and although her children wondered, they were not encouraged to ask questions. Nor did they really care.

In a sudden spasm of decision, Aunt Hermione jerked the family out of its melancholy groove. No one else had initiative for action, so she took matters into her own hands. She and the Rector would go to a little French bathing place they knew of; and May and Luttrell would come with them. Hubert and Hero would go with Uncle Harry, who was to spend the summer with one of his daughters. The decision was received with approval; and Lennox and his wife felt free to go to visit Dot's mother at Brighton.

No one suggested that Mr. Desmond should join either party; but when May said,

"You are coming with us, Kythe. You want a change dreadfully, darling. You have got so thin, and all your colour gone——"

Kythe replied with a quiet firmness that took them all by surprise:

"No, I am not going to France. I am taking Father away; he wants a change too. We are going to the Norfolk Broads. He will like the boating better than bathing."

Mr. Desmond looked up in his quick, watchful way;

then gave his shoulders a little resigned, indifferent shrug.

"I got Mrs. Lennox-Luttrell to take rooms for us," continued Kythe. "We leave on Monday."

CHAPTER XXII

TRUE LOVE

GERVASE took Lady Katherine down to the retreat by the sea which she had selected, and stayed there with her for a few days. Neither of them cared much to talk of what had happened, nor to hazard any suggestions as to what fate would be likely to overtake Teresa. If she had to answer to a charge of perjury and blackmail, and be sentenced to a term of imprisonment, it meant more odious notoriety, more shame, more humiliation. It was no use thinking of it; it would be bad enough when it came.

Gervase did not see the Desmonds before he left. The relations between the families was so awkward and equivocal that he no longer knew whether he was looked on as friend or foe; and beyond a letter to May expressing his deep sympathy and distress at their loss, and a formal call on Mrs. Raymond, at which Hero was present and he was therefore unable to exchange any confidential remarks with his hostess, he had no communication with them. Kythe he did not see at all.

He intended to get hold of the Rector and find out from him how the land lay; but Lady Katherine made

such demands on his time and his services that he found no opportunity to do so.

Lance and Guin found congenial company at the seaside after their kind. They noticed, with their unchildish precocity, that Uncle Arthur was changed, and not such good fun as he used to be.

They had long talks about whether his queer state had anything to do with Kythe. Guin was frankly incredulous of the tale that he wanted to marry Kythe.

"She is only a school-girl," she repeated, scornfully. "Same as me. He is old enough to be our father."

"That doesn't make much difference," objected Lance, sagely. "They do these things, you know, no matter how old they are. Asses, people are, when they are in love."

"Well, but Lance, she is our half-sister. He *can't*, you know."

"I'm not quite sure he can't," replied Lance, with perplexed, crinkled brow and reflective eyes. "He isn't any real relation of hers. And perhaps it is because he thinks he can't, or he oughtn't to, that he is so different. Perhaps he is sorry about it."

Guin gave this her reluctant consideration.

Lady Katherine noticed the change too. She held the stern old-fashioned view that it was better to be unhappy than to fail in pride and dignity, and she would as soon have compromised on cheating at cards as on this question of propriety. He must "get over it." There were other girls than this girl. It would be almost better he should never marry at all.

"I think I shall go back to-morrow," he said, one evening. "Do you think you can manage?"

"Have you let Mellish know?" asked Lady Katherine.

"No. I am not going to The Domain."

"Where, then?" in surprise. "To the Leighs?"

"I think I shall go and stay with Hugh for a bit."

Lady Katherine said nothing, but thought a great deal. There was a bad strain in the family; and under stress it was likely to come out. Why should Arthur want to go to Redlands and the Rattlers, rather than to the Leighs?

She lay awake until late; and heard him go to bed. She could not rid herself of the idea, not the first time it had assailed her, that he walked unsteadily, and it took all her self-control next day to prevent herself looking to see how much whiskey he had consumed.

He was to leave by an afternoon train; and before lunch, she took an opportunity of having a talk with him.

She broached, of her own accord, the subject on which she had kept silence. She told of the long months in which the old Squire was wearing himself to death with the secret he locked up in his own heart, and how at last she had got it from him; how it preyed on him that he had killed a man, and that he alone knew where the man was who had "disappeared," and what had happened to him; how he searched the cellar, in desperate anxiety, to find the entrance to the underground room or passage from which Desmond appeared so suddenly and into which he fell back; how

hopeless it was to think of helping him or saving him—if perchance he had not been killed—after day on day had passed; how determined she herself had been, when she came to know the story, that he should not expose himself or his name to such publicity or suspicion as the truth would entail and to the possible punishment that it might bring; how the sight of Mrs. Desmond and her grief weighed on his conscience, and how the guilty secret told on them both.

"I did all I could to atone," she said, sadly. "I stood by the Desmonds; and I took charge of Teresa's children and gave them their chance. I have done wrong; but I had to think of my husband and our name. I would do the same again."

Then,

"The name and place will come to you, Arthur. Great sacrifices have been made for them; you will keep them and hand them on in honour?"

"There has been a good deal too much sacrifice," said Gervase, almost sullenly. "I don't say you were wrong, Gran, to shield my grandfather. You could not very well do anything else then. But I don't see why it should go any further."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I am paying very dear for the name and the place. There is all this row, and the disgrace of our relationship with Teresa, on the one hand; we have not been spared that. And on the other hand, you want to strip me of my happiness and my chance of living the way I want to do."

With some alarm, she saw he had been drinking again.

"All I want is the wife I want. Anyone can have the rest. I want Kythe, Gran. I was a fool to tell her it was not possible. It *is* possible. There is no real reason against it, only these old-world notions of what is fit and becoming and so on. What is all that, compared with my happiness and hers? Why, in the Lord's name, should we be sacrificed to your notions? People don't care a bit about all that old-fashioned dignity and stuff, nowadays. We can get on without it. I can't get on without Kythe. And as for honour; there is just as much honour in telling the truth and facing the music as in keeping secrets."

Lady Katherine spoke slowly. Her face was very white and her lips shook. He had hit her hard.

"Have you thought of what may happen if you marry her? Now that Mr. Desmond has lost his wife, do you not see the possibility of Teresa getting him, after all? Suppose she does *not* go to prison, Arthur? Suppose she gets her claws into him—she is still fascinating—and tricks him or persuades him into marrying her, for the sake of the children, or something like that?"

He kept a sullen silence.

"With Kythe Desmond so fond of Lance and Guin —her half-brother and sister—and Teresa, their mother, married to their father, in constant association with them, and you? You could not keep her out of your house, out of your affairs. Could you face that,

knowing what you know of her, and her capacity for vindictiveness, for mischief, for intrigue?"

Gervase wriggled uneasily. He knew he had neither courage nor capacity to fight Teresa.

"If you do it, Arthur, you will have to leave The Domain, and take the children, for the rest of my life. I will not sanction or countenance any such unnatural and unseeming arrangement, nor have anything at all to do with anyone connected with it."

That was their good-bye. She walked into the house, refusing his arm, and did not come down to lunch. He left without seeing her again.

If it had not been for the whiskey with which he had been consoling, and inflaming, his grief, he could never have spoken to her in such a fashion. And as the effects of his drinks wore off, he grew bitterly ashamed of himself. Lady Katherine, in the exposure that had taken place, was shown to be one of the offenders, not one of the victims; one in the conspiracy of silence; and no matter how one sympathised with her fierce defence of her husband's name and reputation, and the family dignity, no matter how one admired her stern capacity for holding her tongue, the fact remained that she had done wrong; and people recognised it and meted out to her a certain condemnation. She could not fail to know it and feel it. And he had emphasised it; "rubbed it in," as he said to himself, with reddening face and inward contrition; and, she who had been so good to him, was a lonely old woman, brooding on past woes and troubles, broken in health, with her hopes all centred on one thing—

his, Arthur Gervase's future dealings with the family name and home.

He felt a complete brute.

Also he was conscious that he had been, not drunk, but on the borders of sobriety; and that in strict sobriety he did not hold the lax views he had expressed. He belonged to the respectable, conventional school; he approved of social canons and restrictions; he knew that such a situation as he would create, by marrying Kythe under the conditions that had grown up among them, would offend his taste and his convictions all his life long. The added terror of possible close relations with Teresa—Teresa reinforced by that fellow Desmond for a husband—made him shrink all over.

He disliked Desmond exceedingly. He disliked him when he thought him a cool, dangerous ruffian; he disliked him still though he knew him to be an injured victim. He was coarse; without the same excuse for coarseness as such people as the Rattlers had, for instance, who had never had any refinement to lose. He had let himself coarsen. In an environment where every man's hand had to keep his head, he had "made good" as a man; but he had let slip that which made him a gentleman.

Gervase remembered Kythe's wild loathing of her father. It was strange to hear of her now in constant attendance on Desmond—a common sorrow, of course, often heals such feuds, and it was as much jealousy of Mrs. Desmond as anything else that made the Desmonds resent their father's monopolising presence. Kythe——

How he longed for her now. How scornfully he thought of the half-patronising way in which he estimated her love for him. He wanted her overwhelmingly, and thought of her, showering her sweet care on the ex-convict Desmond, with a hunger that was like a physical pain.

Of course, now that Desmond had such a pitiful tale of injury and persecution and unprovoked misfortune to pitch, they would think of him quite differently. Instead of a cold-blooded scoundrel, he would be the innocent martyr, the defrauded, the dispossessed. They would try to make up to him for his misfortunes, would shower sympathy, love, on him. And he, Gervase, who had never concealed his dislike —it would tell against him with them; with Kythe. They would think of him as the brother of Teresa——

So he tormented himself. So he went over the track. And as much as he longed for Kythe and her sweetness, so much and more he hated the idea of marriage with her and all that it would mean.

When he got to Redlands, he was in a thoroughly wretched and unstrung condition, at odds with fate and all the world; and Hugh noted with misgiving aroused anew, that he took far too much whiskey.

Hugh was not a bad fellow, although weak enough to have let himself be drawn into certain shady transactions. He was quite happy with "the Rattler crowd"; they suited him. His wife was quieting down these days, and both were ambitious for the little daughter, and anxious to give her every chance in life. Mrs. Hugh had always liked her brother-in-law. He

had never given himself airs about her, she said; and she was worried as well as Hugh. Husband and wife had long consultations about Arthur's state of mind, and the Desmond girl, and Teresa. They sent him over as often as they could to the Manor Farm; but Tom Leigh, had they but known it, was as worried as they were.

Gervase stayed a few days with Tom Leigh, and heard from him how the Desmonds had gone abroad in batches, and how the little girl had taken charge of her father and was with him up the Norfolk Broads.

"She is the pluckiest of them all," said Tom Leigh, who knew nothing about the love affair. "Her mother over again."

Gervase came back to his brother's and brooded and drank, in gloomy alternations of defiance of the conventions that he believed in, and acceptance of a decree against which he was in revolt.

Had he but known, he was never out of Kythe's thoughts. She boated and picnicked with her father, always on the same unconfidential terms; and while the soft curves came back to her cheeks and the rich colour to her skin, her absent, dreamy eyes, so like her mother's, saw the lover who had jilted her in every changing aspect of the landscape. Everywhere his face and figure were framed; there was no escape from her overmastering pre-occupation.

He had jilted her; she would flush and stiffen with anger at the recollection. He was a coward, afraid to stand up to social disapproval. He was a cheat, an impostor, who had stolen what he had no right to

have, because he wasn't man enough to keep it. He was Arthur, her dear love who had kissed her in those rapturous dusks, in the soft dim, dewy evenings, when no one knew—and the longing to see him again, to beseech, to argue, to persuade, alternated with the anger that wanted to see him again to upbraid, sneer, denounce.

She grew into womanhood in those tense weeks, with an expression old beyond her years, reserved, self-possessed and self-controlled as a woman of ripe experience. Her father watched with feelings that never found their way into words; and noted with each passing day the growing likeness to her mother.

In the autumn they returned home, and the household resumed its accustomed way.

Kythe urged her father to take up some employment; and he bought the lease of some building land to lay out in cottages with gardens, allotments, and sports grounds for town workers, in connection with a slum settlement. Designing the houses and gardens by degrees absorbed his interest; and Kythe gave him ideas for the interiors of the houses from the housekeeper's point of view.

Tales reached her ears that Gervase was drinking. She heard that he made Redlands his headquarters and that Lady Katherine was gravely offended with him. Lance was taken from school and put into the "shops" to learn engineering; Guin was sent to a finishing school in Paris. The parting between them was bitter; but Lady Katherine was inexorable. Teresa was sentenced to two years' imprisonment, and it was

thought best that the children should leave the place, at least for a time. Gervase did not approve, Kythe heard; and his relations with his grandmother became more strained.

Gervase heard of Kythe's return; and after a struggle with himself, took to haunting the lane again. Once or twice he saw her in the distance; once he met her face to face near the garden door, with her father. The two men lifted their hats and passed in silence. Kythe bowed slightly. She did not so much as colour, let alone look back at him. But she was achingly conscious of his flushed face and the aroma of spirits.

Gervase began to think in a new direction. The whirl of angry pride in which Kythe had parted from him had never assumed much significance in his estimate. She was angry, that was all. She was covering her defeat. It never occurred to him that he could not whistle her back, if he wanted to. Something, however, of the unmoved resolution in her face as he passed them, her look of complete absorption in her own schemes, whatever they were, affected him with a feeling of terror. It was like a hand laid on his heart to stop its beating.

The beating was the more violent. In a panic, he imagined he had lost her, completely; and by his own deed, not by the decrees he was half-minded to defy.

She had not looked back, had shown no confusion, had not changed colour. She had looked him fairly in the face when she bowed. No shirking or shrinking. Good God, what had he done?

She had said, "That is what is called jilting, isn't

it?" She had said, "If you cannot face the first trouble that comes, you are not fit for me to want." And she was so young, it would be fairly easy for her to be carried away by the new sensations, and in a revulsion of feeling to transfer all her love and her loyalty to the ill-used father. Besides, what she said was true.

He *had* jilted her. He *had* broken down before the first trouble. Why in the name of anything should she trust him again, or care for him any more?

A great desolation overtook him, and he went to bed very drunk indeed.

Next day he was more ashamed of himself than ever.

"She is quite right," he thought, ruefully. "I am no end of a rotter. We are all rotten. What hope is there for people like us!"

He and Hugh were out early. It was Sunday, a bright, clean, sparkling day, with no wind. All the world seemed gay and happy.

"I say, you know," began Hugh. "I'm not much of a one to read sermons. Teresa was right when she slapped that at me. But you know, old man, no matter what the trouble is—and I know you are in it pretty deep—drink won't help. Makes it worse. Makes people sick. A drunkard is a beastly thing. Even I have never gone that way."

"Who says I have?"

"I do. Unless you pull up—good and quick. We can't afford to play tricks, Arthur. We haven't got the moral stuffing. We've got to run strict and straight, or we'll go off the track. Don't let there be

two of us. We have all been proud of you—the wife is breaking her heart about it."

Never a word said Arthur, and Hugh said no more either. But his dyed and painted wife nearly cried with joy when Arthur asked her if she would get little Katherine ready and let her come to church with him. There were actually tears in her eyes as she watched him stride away, holding the child's hand as she skipped and trotted beside him.

She sat with him, little Katherine, rosy and demure, in the Gervase enclosure, swinging her little feet and straining for the hassock to stand on; he finding her places in the big books which she could not read, but which she conned with impressive attention. May and Luttrell Desmond sat with Aunt Hermione under the pulpit; Hero and Hubert, Lennox and his wife, Mr. Desmond and Kythe, in the family pew. Kythe and her father sat at the end, sharing a hymn-book. It was evident that, having made up their minds to put a brave face on things and to carry on their daily life as far as possible without flinching, it was well with them, and they had found a measure of peace.

Many eyes were turned towards Major Gervase and his little niece. He lifted her on to his knee during the sermon, and she went to sleep.

Closely as he watched, he could not see Kythe look once in his direction. Yet had he known—something in the return to his normal ways, in the signs of a new resolve to shoulder his burdens as she was shouldering hers, to do his duty by his own people, however little

credit they might be to him, to stand by Hugh and his wife, and the little maiden christened after the grandmother who had been mother and guardian-angel to them; this seemed to bring him nearer to her, and to shed one ray of hope on the desolate horizon of her love.

Lady Katherine came in, slow and infirm, but stately, for the Sacrament service; and Gervase held the door open for her, for the first time for many a Sunday, and put the hassock in its place, as he used to do. She looked at the flushed, awakened child, trying with a deep sense of propriety to sit straight and behave nicely. The sleepy, blinking eyes were soft and bright.

She touched the warm cheeks with her hand.

"Is this little Katherine?" she said, low and gentle.

"Yes, Gran. Do you mind?"

"I am very thankful if she is to be brought up in the Church."

It was a treaty of peace. In it were included the family at Redlands.

He stayed out the service, which little Katherine slept through peacefully; and saw his grandmother back to The Domain.

"When are you coming home?" she asked, at the front door.

"May I bring Kythe?" he asked, after a pause; adding, "if she will come!"

A smile, more sarcastic than amused, broke out on the old lady's face.

"I am glad you have the grace not to count your

chickens," she observed. "And am I to have the Rattlers and all your other choice acquaintances too?"

"Only Katherine's mother," he answered, with a heart full of thankfulness. "They called this little thing after you to give her a chance."

"Don't stay away too long," said Lady Katherine.

He went back to Redlands with the little girl on his shoulder, happier than he had been for many a day. Little Katherine had great chatter to pour out to her mother, and the mid-day meal, before the usual Sunday incursion of Rattlers and their intimates, was pleasant and peaceful. Hugh breathed more freely when he saw the Tantalus, from which Arthur had helped himself once, pass its second round untouched; and his wife cried freely, to the serious detriment of her farcical "make-up," when she heard how Lady Katherine had passed the olive-branch along.

Next Sunday night Gervase paced the lane again. He had spent the day in the open air; his soul was his own again, his head clean and clear. He had an unreasoning, instinctive belief that Kythe would come to the garden door; and when he heard the lifting latch, he was alert and prepared. In the deep shadow, he waited unseen until she stepped outside.

She found him between her and the door before she quite realised he was near.

"Are you going to forgive me?"

"Why should I?"

Her voice was not so steady as she could have wished.

"Everyone else is forgiven. Mayn't I be?"

"What excuse had you, that you should be forgiven?"

"None. So all the more I need forgiveness. People with excuses don't."

"It is easy to joke."

"It isn't. It is the only way not to despair. Kythe!"

He held her hands and tried to draw her into his arms, but she resisted him.

"What is it you want? Another opportunity to tell me you can't possibly marry me?"

She spoke with the garnered bitterness of months of tension.

All his irresolution went to the winds.

"No. You know it isn't. I want an opportunity to tell you what you know very well. I can't do without you—Kythe! Kythe?"

He turned her face up and kissed her lips, drunk with joy and triumph. When she struggled he held her fast. She could not help returning his kisses; her pride was fast breaking down.

"Oh!" she said, passionately, almost in a sob. "It isn't fair. It isn't fair. It is horrible that I should want anything so much as to overlook what you did. I shall never forgive it."

"Never?" with his face against hers, his kisses hot and insistent.

"No. Not even if I marry you. I shall always have it in my heart."

"And I shall always—always—try to make you forget."

"You were a brute. All men are."

"But you love me?"

* * * *

"You must come in and tell Father yourself," she whispered, presently. "And if you are not really and *very* nice to him, *I* shall jilt *you*."

"I'll fall on my face before him, rather than that."

She brought him into the study where Mr. Desmond sat at the window, smoking.

His weary gaze came back from the garden at the sound of his daughter's voice; and hardened as he saw Gervase.

Neither of them was very coherent; and he rose, looking at them with cynical amusement.

It stung Gervase.

"I asked you once before, Desmond, if you would let me marry your daughter. I am asking again now; and in addition, I am asking your forgiveness for anything I may have done to make your very great trouble heavier. Kythe——" he turned to the girl, whose eyes were fixed on her father, "you can say it better than I."

Desmond held out a hand to his daughter. He had never touched her of his own accord before.

"Do you want him?" he asked. "Is he good enough for you? What will you give me if I give him to you —will you give me that kiss you have never given me yet?"

Kythe coloured as she had never done for Gervase

when Desmond put his arm round her and looked down quizzically at her drooped eyelids.

"I would have given it to you long ago," she said, half-laughing, half-tremulous, "if you had ever asked for it!"

Desmond kissed her, greedily and noisily, the way they all disliked so fiercely.

"I can give her you now," he said to Gervase; "now that I have had something for myself—at last!"

THE END

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